

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Sub-committee on Online Harms and Disinformation

Oral evidence: Russian disinformation and sporting sanctions, HC 1201

Tuesday 15 March 2022

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Julian Knight (Chair); Kevin Brennan; Steve Brine; Clive Efford; Julie Elliott; Damian Green; Dr Rupa Huq; Simon Jupp.

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Witnesses

[I](#): Kevin Bakhurst, Group Director of Broadcasting and Online Content, Ofcom; Keir Giles, Senior Consulting Fellow, Chatham House; Rebecca Skippage, Disinformation Editor, BBC World Service; and Vera Tolz, Sir William Mather Professor of Russian Studies, University of Manchester.

[II](#): Nigel Huddleston, MP, Minister for Sport and Tourism, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

[III](#): Mark Bullingham, Chief Executive, The Football Association; and Helen MacNamara, Chief Policy and Corporate Affairs Officer, Premier League.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Kevin Bakhurst, Keir Giles, Rebecca Skippage and Vera Tolz.

Q1 Chair: This is the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee and our hearing on, first, Russian disinformation and, then, governance in football, in relation to the Chelsea situation and wider issues of ownership in football.

First, we have Russian disinformation. Our first panel consists of Kevin Bakhurst, group director of broadcasting and online content at Ofcom; Keir Giles, senior consulting fellow at Chatham House, who is joining us virtually due to the traffic around the Oxford area I believe; Rebecca Skippage, disinformation editor, BBC World Service; and Vera Tolz, Sir William Mather Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Manchester. Kevin, Keir, Rebecca and Vera, thank you very much for joining us today.

The first question should probably go to Keir Giles, and then I will maybe bring in the other panellists. Keir, what examples of disinformation have we seen coming from the Russian Government before and during the invasion? Do you think this is a centralised operation?

Keir Giles: Yes, absolutely it is a centralised operation, as these always are, but it is also decentralised, in that there is a lot of individual initiative in how narratives are developed and pushed forward.

We have seen strategic and operational narratives. We have seen the overall framing of this conflict in a way that is unrecognisable to anybody with a grasp of European history that differs from President Putin's.

Then, operationally, we have seen preparations for multiple false flag operations—for ways in which Russia can justify either the invasion overall or individual actions within it. Those attempts continue, of course—trying to set up the conditions where Russia can blame any of the human rights atrocities that it is undertaking within Ukraine today on anybody else.

To a large extent, the discrediting of that disinformation by prebuttals and by intelligence disclosures by the US and the UK has been highly successful. We have not seen those narratives get nearly as much traction as they would have done without those active interventions by the US and the UK, making sure that the media and the general public were prepared for disinformation and false flag narratives. Nevertheless, they do continue and are being spread very actively, not just on social media, but also by individuals—by influencers, agents of influence and the useful idiots that operate on behalf of Russia.

Q2 Chair: We know a fair few of them. What does disinformation tell you about the next steps that Russia may take?

Keir Giles: There are a number of ways in which we can learn what Russia is planning from their information preparation of the environment.



If we see Russia starting to present narratives that it wants to persuade either foreign publics or foreign politicians are true, then that does give an indication of what the next steps are likely to be. The simplest cases are where Russia actually lays the groundwork for an accusation against another country for something that it is preparing to do itself. But we also have indicators where, again, the useful idiots or the agents of influence promote narratives themselves that are new and apparently appear out of nowhere. Those are good indicators for what the eventual Russian information effort is going to be. We pay close attention to those people who we know repeat Russian disinformation for what they are saying, because that actually provides a canary. It is an indicator of the direction of travel and what is coming next.

Q3 Chair: Vera Tolz, when it comes to disinformation, what have you been seeing from Russia before and during the invasion of Ukraine?

Vera Tolz: In addition to what Keir has said, I would say that we can now see retrospectively that since 2013 the Russian state media and particularly television have had an absolutely unprecedented in my lifetime—and I lived in the Soviet Union until 1982—campaign around Ukraine. Actually, because of the intensity of that disinformation campaign from 2013 and the fact that it was basically non-stop, it absolutely dominated Russian state media, to the extent that the fake Opposition in the Russian Parliament, of whom, for instance, the Communist party of Russia are representatives—the head of this Communist party unit or faction in the Parliament complained about it: “Why is there so much about Ukraine?” Clearly, it was not for nothing. There was this preparation for further actions against Ukraine. It started in 2013, when Putin for the first time said Russians and Ukrainians were one people or the same nation—I was very struck by that comment, because it completely contradicted the line that even the communist regime took. Then, from 2014—even more so after the annexation of the Crimea.

Another interesting point to add to what Keir has said is about public opinion. I don’t know how much it is prepared, in Russia, for actual war against Ukraine. That is why it is forbidden to say that there is war. Until 24 February, the line on television was that war with Ukraine was impossible—“How can you imagine that we will kill our brothers and sisters in Ukraine?” That is now quite problematic for the Russian propaganda journalists, because they don’t even know what language to use. Sometimes the word “war” slips in and then they take it back. But I would say the most extraordinary of all the false narratives we are hearing now—it is repeated again and again—is about the devastation you see in Ukrainian cities, from Kharkiv to Chernihiv to Sumy. It is that the Ukrainian army is doing that, so the Ukrainians are bombing their own cities. This is, I think, the most extraordinary narrative and it is repeated again and again.

Q4 Chair: So they are suggesting that the Ukrainians are blowing up their own cities in order to basically make Russia look bad.

Vera Tolz: Yes.



Q5 Chair: Do they take the world for cretins, do you think, in that respect? It is an incredible narrative to actually come out with. That leads me on to another question, Vera. Is this disinformation for internal purposes, external purposes or both? And if it is for both, what sort of percentage is internal and what external?

Vera Tolz: There are three issues here. One is that of course the main focus is now on the internal audience. Even on official state television channels, you see occasionally these main propaganda journalists, like Simonyan, who is editor-in-chief of RT, expressing concern about the fact that on social media, in the digital space, within Russia, the narrative is challenged. You probably saw today there was also an incident. So there is concern about that, and the main thing is of course for internal audiences.

As for external audiences, my sense—it might be wrong—is that basically Russian state media have given up on western audiences. I think RT has basically given up the pretence. But we see different narratives, and different interpretations of what is going on, in Latin America, Africa and the middle east. And this is the target. Quick research that my assistants have done shows that the uptake of RT Spanish in Latin America and RT Arabic is up now.

The third—I think very important—point is that a lot research and a lot of analysis of what the Kremlin is doing is couched in the language of weaponisation of information. The idea is that Putin himself understands full well, and the people around him understand full well, what the reality is, and then they spin a false narrative. Of course, when Putin opens his mouth, he lies, but I am absolutely sure that he believed in the fiction he created around Ukraine that the majority of Ukrainians, or certainly Russian speakers in Ukraine, would support the Russian army, because the whole military strategy has been designed on the basis of that complete fiction. They were talking on 24 February—they were showing on official television, on state television—about some kind of ukaz, which planned a victory concert in Kiev on the 26th.

Q6 Chair: They were advertising a victory concert on the 26th?

Vera Tolz: Yes, and fireworks. Putin has become a hostage of these false narratives. If you look historically, that is what happens with dictators.

Q7 Chair: Keir, briefly, before I turn to Rebecca on another issue, follow up on what Vera said there about the disinformation war—the fact that Russia was effectively giving up on the west, and we were worried for many years about Russian disinformation, although it always seemed quite a blunt instrument in the west. It seems to be ever more blunt.

On countries such as Israel, and countries in the middle east—Israel in particular is an important strategic ally for the west—and Latin America, should we be overly concerned that Putin's lies and state-sponsored disinformation are getting their tendrils into those parts of the world?

Keir Giles: We should be concerned, but that is not a new concern, because part of Russia's push for global influence that we have seen over the last three years involves developing influence in countries that were



not previously of particular interest to Russia. Of course, the more support that Russia enjoys globally, the harder it is to counteract Russia here in Europe, but we should qualify and add to what Vera said about the state disinformation tools perhaps being less interested in projecting messages abroad. That, of course, has only limited effect on how much disinformation Russia manages to deliver to our populations in order to undermine the validity of democratic decisions in this country.

RT and Sputnik have always been the organs that got the most attention, but they are not the most significant part of how Russia disseminates that information. There are also the people who pass on the messages from the Russian embassy, from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, from the influencers, the network propagandists.

Coming back to your point about whether they take us for cretins, unfortunately, the problem is there is never going to be a shortage of cretins. There is never going to be a lack of vulnerable or easily exploitable people whom Russia can embrace and whose feelings they can validate by giving them narratives to feed that counteract the main way they see the world around them.

Rebecca might be able to talk shortly about how covid deniers have pivoted seamlessly to backing Russian disinformation, because Russia has always been adept at targeting vulnerable people. If you look at the typical profile of a Russian propagandist, they tend to be quite sad and lonely figures whose lives have generally been characterised by failure, and then they have a cause to latch on to. That is a far more pernicious and hard-to-identify problem than the bright, shiny objects of RT and Sputnik.

Q8 Chair: Rebecca, do you agree—I certainly do agree—that much of the focus on RT and Sputnik has probably been a bit misplaced and that, actually, it is that below-the-line type of disinformation, which is still disseminating in our society and being shared by vulnerable people with other vulnerable people, to a degree?

Rebecca Skippage: Yes, I think I would agree with what Keir was saying. There are two ways to look at this. As both my colleagues here were saying, there is the view that people are getting within Russia itself, which is completely dominated by state media. It is very difficult for us to understand with our pluralistic media and the sense of public service media in this country what it is like to deal with a media where you are told lies constantly and they can flip from one hour to another depending on what is being said.

In reference to what Vera and Keir were talking about, we did a piece which looked at three Ukrainian citizens whose Russian families would not believe that they were being bombed. The woman involved said to her mother, "Can you not hear that I am being shelled? Here are the pictures." And her mother said, "No, no that wouldn't be happening." We perhaps find that kind of state narrative difficult to understand in this country.



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To your point about the other areas of disinformation: absolutely, where we see it in a most pernicious sense is on social media. Telegram has been a huge area, as far as disinformation is concerned. It is slightly the wild west from the point of view of the lack of moderation that goes on. A lot of the information that has been spread about what has been happening has been there. Twitter has been the other main port of call as far as the spreading of mis and disinformation is concerned.

On TikTok, a lot of people have come to this reasonably late and said, "Oh well, TikTok is all about people dancing and doing daft things". Actually, if you follow it over the last couple of years, it has been instrumental in where young people have shown what has been going on and shared things. It is really easy to share material on there without metadata, so you can put anything on and it is difficult for people to check whether it is mis or disinformation from that.

There is a whole ecosystem of people who are sharing things deliberately or not deliberately. We knew, certainly from our experience of what happens after a catastrophe or something like the pandemic, that the key time where disinformation flourishes is at the beginning. I always say disinformation loves a vacuum. When you don't know what is going on—we saw this with the pandemic—that is when all the conspiracy theories can start to take root.

This is why my team and various other teams at the BBC who specialise in this were planning a couple of weeks ahead of the invasion as to how we were going to respond to it. We got our ducks in a row from the point of view of disinformation specialists, language specialists, regional specialists, open source intelligence people, and user-generated content specialists. We got them all together into a group so that, sadly, when the invasion did occur, we were able immediately to jump in and say, "Okay, we can verify this is happening, or show that this is old footage or material that is being used inappropriately."

Q9 **Chair:** Of course, Telegram you have just cited would not be covered under the current guise of the Online Safety Bill, because it is not a tier 1 organisation. I will not ask you as a BBC employee to comment on that.

Rebecca Skippage: Thank you.

Q10 **Simon Jupp:** If I may, I would like to focus on the BBC World Service for a moment? You have just talked about the level of disinformation and misinformation that you are coming across and that your teams and journalists are seeing, both on the ground in Ukraine and around the region, and also back here in London. How do you verify that information? How do you drill down and discover? There is pressure, isn't there? Now, in the age of social media, news spreads fast on social media, whether it is real news or not, and when it doesn't appear on the BBC, audiences start questioning why. How do you verify, and what is the time involved in doing so?

Rebecca Skippage: I can talk you through exactly what we did, if that would be helpful.

Simon Jupp: Yes, absolutely.

Rebecca Skippage: This was an unprecedented challenge that we were looking at. As I said, we had this group of people who we knew were all interested in the subject and had subject expertise to bring to it. We were all very simply on a chat app together. When the invasion happened, my role was simply to harness the expertise that they had. People started dropping into this chat: "Have you seen this?", "This is starting to trend", "This is really popular on these telegram channels"—which were being followed by the language experts—and, "Would this sort of tank be in there at this point?" With their levels of expertise, and using tools that, frankly, anybody can use—Google Reverse Image, Yandex, TinEye—but also crucially that local knowledge of, "Hang on a minute, that isn't the right accent from that particular area," they jumped on these clips, and we created a really simple grid.

I have been a journalist for 25 years. You have to keep things simple when you are trying to turn things around quickly, so we created a grid, which was a dynamic space that everybody could come into. We said that green is, "Yes, we've verified that it is true," red is, "It is not true," and white is, "We are still working on it". What worked particularly well was that we said to everybody within the BBC, "You come to that grid. We are not going to send stuff out saying, 'This has been verified' or 'This hasn't'," because things were moving so quickly, so everybody was pulled to that.

There were tweaks and we improved on it with colleagues at UGC, who have said yes as far as permission to use footage is concerned. Basically, that has been running for the last couple of weeks. It has been the basis, certainly before we were able to get teams in there, of our footage, to tell not only the accurate story of what was happening, but the false narratives and being able to show the inaccurate stuff that was going out.

Q11 **Simon Jupp:** Given the level of resource you have pumped into this—and rightly so, given that it is the BBC World Service—how much do you also interact with other public service broadcasters to ensure that they are not broadcasting stuff that audiences will then expect on the BBC World Service, especially domestically here?

Rebecca Skippage: The one thing about the disinformation community is that it is really collaborative. If you follow one person on Twitter who is part of the disinformation community, you will probably interact with everybody else as well. There was a real collaborative sense of, "We need to be telling people the true story." People were verifying things out in the public ecosystem, as well as the work we were doing privately. We would rather pause than get something wrong. There is a huge element of doing that, but thanks to the expertise of the people who work for the BBC and the World Service, and to the investment that has been made in disinformation journalism and open-source intelligence journalism, so far we have managed to steer that course correctly.

Q12 **Simon Jupp:** On information flow, this is essentially new sabotage that is being attempted by the Russian authorities and then by people peddling

their nonsense. What about physical and technical sabotage? Have your teams and journalists come across any of that sabotage, either in the region or back here?

Rebecca Skippage: My teams are based in the UK. I also run teams based in Nigeria and India, but they have not been as involved in this conflict. As far as technical sabotage is concerned, the cyber-security piece is an issue that has concerned the Russians almost more than us journalists, to a certain extent. For example, they have been so concerned about the interception of what they are doing that they have switched to using telephones and things like that, which are very easy to intercept. Certainly, we have not seen that to a great extent with the work we have been doing.

Q13 **Simon Jupp:** Clearly, because of attempts to interrupt your programming and to ensure that it is not accessible to some people in the region, you have had to launch new shortwave transmitters and things like that in the area. How much of that has gone to actually making sure that those audiences can access your programming? Are you still getting complaints that people cannot access it at the moment?

Rebecca Skippage: I cannot speak to the complaints—that is not something that comes across my desk. This is what the World Service does: we get the truth out to people, and we make it as freely accessible as we possibly can, so if we need to change the ways we do that, that is what we do. What has been really impressive is the way that that has been done at such speed. We have gone from things like creating two different new shortwave frequencies, to saying, “If you want to try to circumvent some of the restrictions that are being put on you, this is how you use a VPN, this is how you use Tor to get on to the dark web.” We have also started up the TikTok channels—so, TikTok in English and TikTok in Russian.

Whatever your point of entry into trying to find accurate information, hopefully we have considered that and are able to offer something to the Russian people, who deserve truthful and accurate information more than ever before

Simon Jupp: Fascinating. Thank you.

Q14 **Clive Efford:** Kevin, can I ask you about the role of Ofcom? If anybody else has any observations on these questions, please indicate. We have a flurry of information at this time, and some of it is misinformation and disinformation. What do you make of Ofcom’s role in a fast-moving situation like this?

Kevin Bakhurst: Thank you very much for the question. Ofcom has an important role as part of the ecology and in listening to the academics, and to Rebecca, about the work that is going on across the piece. I think our role is an important part of the overall approach to tackling disinformation and trying to ensure that audiences in the UK can receive news that is trusted, accurate, properly regulated and impartial, as Rebecca has touched on. From our point of view, one of the greatest



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disinfectants to tackle the scourge of disinformation is to make sure that mass audiences in the UK can rely on the news that they are given, and that news is widely available to them.

Q15 Clive Efford: The draft Bill requires Ofcom to set up a committee of experts on disinformation. Does that suggest that Ofcom currently lacks the expertise it needs in a situation like this?

Kevin Bakhurst: I am not sure. The new duties in the online safety Bill, which include that responsibility—although it was certainly in the White Paper—would certainly enhance our work in this area. At the moment, we obviously do not have statutory duties in the online space. We are very active already in this area, and hopefully Members will be aware that, during the covid period, we did a lot of work on disinformation. We used our media literacy powers to understand what people were receiving, how they were receiving it and what efforts were being made to tackle it, and we also took action ourselves during that crucial period for the UK. We already have a media literacy advisory committee that helps feed into our work. This is an important duty that we have, and I know Mr Green is very interested in this area. It is an important area. We have been stepping it up over the last few years, partly in preparation for online safety, and we continue to invest in that.

Q16 Clive Efford: Moving on, Russia has passed a new fake news law to criminalise those reporting on the situation in Ukraine. Does that suggest that we cannot trust anything coming out of Russia at all? Is it all disinformation and misinformation now?

Kevin Bakhurst: I would take this opportunity to recognise the incredible work that journalists from UK organisations are doing in Russia in the face of that kind of intimidation.

Q17 Clive Efford: I was going to ask you about penetration.

Kevin Bakhurst: In the face of that kind of intimidation and legal action by the Government there, it is not without risk to themselves. It is a really important part of making sure that we are provided with accurate information from Russia. As far as Russian journalists are concerned, undoubtedly those new laws make it nigh on impossible to give a fair and impartial representation of what is happening in Ukraine.

Vera Tolz: Can I chip in here? There are still some very brave Russian journalists from the outlets that have been closed down, such as Ekho Moskv. Novaya Gazeta can hardly operate, and there is also Dozhd/TV Rain. They are now broadcasting the truth on YouTube. The problem is that very few people watch that, but there are still a handful of incredibly brave people who basically accept that they might be arrested and given up to 15 years.

Q18 Clive Efford: You anticipated my question—I was going to come to you and ask exactly about that, and particularly about the news overnight of the journalist on Channel One who made the protest. How much effect do you think that is having within Russia—the protests, the journalists and



that protest in particular?

Vera Tolz: I will start by saying that if you want to know the truth, you can access it in Russia. I talk to my friends in Russia—I know it is a very small bubble—and they all absolutely hate Putin and they are all against the war. I ask, “What media are you consuming?” They all have VPNs, as if they were based in Germany or Holland, and they see everything: BBC, Radio Liberty, Voice of America. There are several anti-war channels on Telegram—they also consume those—and on YouTube several journalists from Ekho Moskvyy, Dozhd/TV Rain and a new newspaper called Novaya Gazeta try to produce programmes that cover what is really going on. On the numbers of people, we don’t really have reliable figures, but you can say that this is an absolute minority of the population so far. However, I think the situation is very unpredictable in Russia and very unpredictable for Putin, because as we know from literature on popular mobilisations, something can happen very suddenly and the whole mood and people’s actions change.

With Ukraine, Putin has a problem. He did similar things in Chechnya and Syria, but Ukraine is not Chechnya or Syria. Eleven million Russian citizens have direct relatives in Ukraine. Some of them do not believe, but in this day and age the secrets cannot be kept forever. Also, the Government did not anticipate major losses among soldiers, and there are major losses. That is a major problem for Putin. If we remember the Afghan war in the Soviet period, by 1984 it became a problem for the Government because people returned from war and also some people lost their lives, and that started creating discontent. It was one of the contributing factors for Gorbachev to start his reforms.

Q19 **Clive Efford:** London has been accused of being the laundromat for dirty money globally, and we have seen through the sanctions a number of Russian oligarchs who are interwoven with cultural issues, sport—Mr Abramovich, Chelsea and so on—and how difficult it is to unravel all that. Do you think we have taken our eye off the ball with regard to that Russian money, where it came from and how it has infiltrated our culture, sport and financial services?

Vera Tolz: The simple answer is yes. I have been thinking that for a while.

Q20 **Clive Efford:** Do you think the Government should have acted sooner? Do you think the warning signs were there?

Vera Tolz: Yes, I do.

Q21 **Clive Efford:** You do not want to elaborate on that.

Vera Tolz: I have been thinking for a while why Britain is regarded as one of the easiest places where people from Russia, but also other parts of the world, feel that they can launder their dirty money.

Keir Giles: There is absolutely no excuse for anybody to be surprised by any of this, because it has been so thoroughly documented, and the only people whose eyes were not on the ball were those who wilfully looked



away. After all, you only have to look through the Intelligence and Security Committee report on Russia from July 2020 to see warnings of all the problems we are talking about precisely today, and the inaction since then by Government on tackling any of those serious issues, including some of the gaping holes in legislation for dealing not only with indirect attacks like disinformation, but direct ones like espionage. There is simply no reason whatsoever for anybody to claim that this now comes as a surprise.

Q22 Clive Efford: Has the approach that we have taken actually been an encouragement for Putin? He has used soft influence—particularly in sport, by using doping to create athletes’ success across the board—and they have paraded sporting success and other things at home to glorify Russia, for want of a better term. How much has that been allowed to influence and encourage Putin in the actions that he is taking today?

Keir Giles: Well, simply having no countermeasures whatsoever leaves an open playing field and an open goal for malign influence in this country. Going back to the specific point about disinformation, you heard Rebecca and Kevin outline ways in which responsible public service broadcasters can make sure that they are not repeating disinformation. That is all well and good, but it does not tackle the problem at source, and it does not deal with the people who are receiving their information not from responsible public service broadcasters.

If you are picking up narratives from social media, the problem remains the same. Without the co-operation of the social media platforms, it is never going to be possible to tackle this. It is trivially easy for those platforms to identify, for example, when a false profile is posting misinformation, pretending to be in Manchester when, in fact, it is in St Petersburg, but if that information is not shared, it is very difficult for researchers and counter-disinformation activists to identify that and eliminate it, because of course the platforms will also not co-operate in shutting them down.

I was interested when Simon Jupp asked about the direct interventions against operations for counter-disinformation. I would have thought that the closing down of BBC Monitoring’s outsourced units in Moscow and Kyiv was an indication of how effective that can be. Previous Select Committee reports on BBC Monitoring effectively being eliminated in the last decade as a national security asset highlighted the vulnerability of outsourcing to Russia and therefore being hostage to the good will of the Russian Government. Now that that good will has been withdrawn, I wonder what the impact is on the rump of operations that was allowed to continue for BBC Monitoring in the UK.

Q23 Chair: Thank you. Vera, you were nodding your head at the point Keir just made on BBC Monitoring.

Vera Tolz: Yes. Like Keir, I was dismayed by the withdrawal, in a way, of some support for BBC Monitoring, which has been a fantastic service. That is the way to run counter-disinformation operations and to keep tabs on

what information or disinformation Governments are disseminating, rather than outsourcing those kinds of activities to third parties, where people are on short-term contracts and are paid on a kind of rolling model depending on how many examples of disinformation they can find, and where, simply, completely untrained people are employed.

We should remember that the disinformation coming from Russia now is, as you said Julian, of such grotesque narratives. "Ukrainians are bombing their own cities"—are they taking us for idiots? Normally, disinformation is not like that. If you look at it, most disinformation is not about wrong facts—isolated facts—but works best by taking facts that, self-standing, are correct in a way, and then selectively using that information and producing a narrative where those facts are taken out of context or put in the wrong context, and their very selection is extremely biased. That kind of disinformation constitutes, according to various estimates, 80% of our information ecology—we should remember that we are focusing on Russia now, but Russia is not the only disinformation actor.

Chair: This Committee has found that there are 39 countries—

Vera Tolz: There is a whole disinformation ecology in which 80% of information is hyper-partisan. It is spin, and to tackle that you really need expertise.

Q24 **Chair:** Before I briefly bring Rebecca in, who wants to talk about BBC monitoring, Vera, you mentioned that you left the Soviet Union in 1982. I think Brezhnev had just finished being President at that point.

Vera Tolz: Until '82 it was Brezhnev, yes.

Q25 **Chair:** Do you think in some ways that Russian disinformation and propaganda is more pernicious now than it was under the Soviets?

Vera Tolz: I think it is more pernicious. In some ways it is more effective. By the late Soviet period, Soviet propaganda was tired. What was shown on television was extremely boring. People switched off. Now, since 2012 in particular, a whole new range of what is called "soft news"—basically talk show programmes—have been introduced in Russia itself. It is non-stop political messaging, and the approach until now has very often been to use selective information, massage the facts, take them out of context and even allow some performance of pluralism, so that everything is structured in the perfect way, whereby people finish watching these programmes with the right sentiment, from the Kremlin's point of view.

These talk shows are theatrical performances. They are extremely absorbing. For my research, I have had to watch some of those programmes—and my friends in Russia pitied me. When you watch hour after hour of that stuff, you start to feel influenced by it emotionally. It is very well done. Of course, RT operated in a very similar way. Initially it started with very poor-quality stuff. It was quite a pathetic operation. With time, it became a similar, quite sleek operation. Yes, it is much more pernicious, but I would also say that what we hear now on television is about a war—an unprecedented war for my lifetime. In a way, it is now



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even more made up of falsehood than I remember from the late Soviet period.

Q26 **Chair:** Before I come to Steve Brine, I know you wanted to come in, Rebecca.

Rebecca Skippage: I just wanted to talk about monitoring.

Chair: Your right to reply.

Rebecca Skippage: Thank you. The basis for our disinformation team is BBC Monitoring. That is how I started the disinformation team in 2018. I would not want anyone to get the impression that we are freelancing this sort of work out. BBC Monitoring is absolutely at the heart of what we do, as are our colleagues in Russia, Ukraine and our Russian colleagues based in the UK. We are absolutely at the heart of this process.

Chair: We do not want to get too into the weeds of that, but both opinions have a great deal of validity about them. Thank you, Rebecca and Vera. Steve Brine?

Q27 **Steve Brine:** Thanks Chair, and thanks to the panel. I do not think anybody in this country would recognise some of the things you were saying, even a few years ago. Part of me feels weary and thinks, "What a complicated world. What a complicated web we have managed to weave in the age of social media." Then I remember my history teaching and realise that, actually, none of this is new or different. I just wonder what your reflections would be on how much of this is a brave new world and how much of this is just a weary next chapter of the same world.

Vera Tolz: It depends on what perspective you want to take. I think there are several issues that, if not entirely new, are at a new stage.

Q28 **Steve Brine:** What I am getting at is that when you talk about disinformation, most people would consider that to be the internet age. They would consider that to be social media and push messages that are way outside the borders of the country that creates that disinformation, whereas this is not just a social media age problem, is it?

Vera Tolz: No, obviously. I don't know where you want me to start, but in the 19th century, even in democracies, it was completely acceptable that the press was highly partisan and you could produce basically spin narratives. The idea of quality news, where reliability of the information is key, starts in the early 20th century. At the same time, you have also state disinformation services also starting in the early 20th century, and this was during the first world war. We hear a lot that disinformation was invented by Stalin or the Soviet Union, but if you look at language national corpora, you will see that in English the word "disinformation" is already used in Parliament in 1903, so MPs and American newspapers accuse each other of disinformation in the late 19th century.

What is new now is the speed with which you can transmit false information and how little effort it takes. If we stick with Russia and the Soviet Union and look at the cold war period, to plant an article with a



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Kremlin-preferred narrative in a foreign newspaper, particularly a western newspaper, is very time-consuming. It is a difficult effort. Now, you can put something in social media in a moment. You have also far more actors involved, because of social media, in spreading questionable information. Because so many actors now can produce their own information, the hold of mainstream media like the BBC on the narrative in western democracies is undermined, and this is a problem.

Q29 Steve Brine: Of course, many people listening to this and our constituents who have contacted us in this vein would think that we are rather pious and pompous sitting here and passing judgment on other countries' disinformation, because we have no experience in this country, of course, of a politically biased press. We do not have a state broadcaster that some people would suggest constantly drip-drips a certain agenda—Brexit. I am being ironic.

Rebecca, let me ask you about how journalists go about verifying a false flag one way or another. How do you do that, or are you reliant on Governments' own intelligence gathering?

Rebecca Skippage: We approach information verification—does it matter where it came from, absolutely, of course—in the same way. It is basic journalism in many ways—fact checking and checking where your sources are. When we talk to schoolchildren through our young reporter scheme or just give bits of information out, which we always try and do whenever we write articles, you look at where it has come from.

I always say this to my journalists: who benefits from it? Who benefits from your thinking that, for example, there are more Muslims giving birth in India than there are Hindus? Who benefits from that? Also, if you have an emotional response to something, that is a key indicator that you should pause. If it makes you angry, happy, outraged, really sad or something like that, pause. Where did it come from? There are really simple tools, as we were just saying to your colleague. Look on Google reverse image. Have a look to see whether other news outlets are picking up on this apparently outrageous bit of news that you would assume they would be reporting if it were true.

We would deal with it, in many ways, within the news operation in the same way that we would suggest that people do when they receive things on WhatsApp. We verify things using some of those tools, as well as the basic journalism of checking with experts and sources.

Q30 Steve Brine: The BBC definitely does not do this, but many news organisations actively seek to stir endlessly, create anger, raise the temperature and pick culture wars—imagine if a Government did that. It is not always the case that every broadcaster or journalistic source is not seeking to stir.

Rebecca Skippage: Due to the work that Kevin's organisation does, from a broadcast perspective we need to play things with a straight bat. What doesn't help is the fact that a lot of the social media platforms reward the fact that you have created emotion in people. There is that danger and



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temptation of putting things there that you know are going to elicit that sort of response, because we know that that is what promotes things in social media feeds. A lot of the work that the BBC is doing through things like the trusted news initiative is working with the platforms to say, "Actually, it shouldn't be about whether you have an emotional reaction to something; it should be about whether it's true or whether it's accurate." I would also say that it is our duty as journalists to believe in good information, and to make it as interesting as the bad information. We all love fake news. Of course we do. It's interesting, isn't it? It creates an emotion in us.

Q31 Steve Brine: *The National Enquirer* made a lot of money out of creating fake news front pages, as did some of the old red tops in our country.

Rebecca Skippage: Completely.

Q32 Steve Brine: Finally, I want to ask you an ethical question. If you report on a false flag that never materialises, you then have to address claims that you are part of the conspiracy yourself. If you report false flags that were never going to materialise, then the Russian state in this instance accuses you of pushing anti-Russian propaganda. That merely serves to prop up a view of the world that we are all against them.

Rebecca Skippage: We report on the information that is available. The concept of false flags is something that we would absolutely report on. We would say, "This is an example of something that has happened before." I cannot see us reporting on something that we think might be about to happen. We do say, "It is possible." I think Keir was talking about this. You can slightly read the runes—"This is the sort of thing that might happen"—but I do not think that I would expect any of my journalists to talk about things that we were not sure had actually happened as a false flag.

Q33 Steve Brine: The Ghost of Kyiv story is a good example of that, isn't it?

Rebecca Skippage: It's a really interesting one. People have asked me over the last couple of weeks whether Ukraine is also guilty of putting out disinformation. In no way would I want to draw a false equivalence, but what you have seen from them is a lot of these kind of memes, and a lot of these historic symbols of patriotism. The Ghost of Kyiv is an absolute classic of that—that noble hero who people can rally around.

Steve Brine: Fascinating. I know that we have to move on, Chair. Thank you.

Chair: Just to say, we are going to have a hard stop in 15 minutes or so.

Q34 Dr Huq: Out of interest, how long has the disinformation post existed at the BBC?

Rebecca Skippage: I started as disinformation editor in September, but the actual disinformation team started in 2018.

Q35 Dr Huq: I think the Labour party has got rid of its rapid rebuttal unit,



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which used to be so effective under Tony Blair. Anyway, the questions that I have are principally for Professor Tolz, and they build on what the Chair was asking and what Steve Brine started with. I was not in the Soviet Union in 1982, but I did go in 1989. I remember that in all the parks they had a laminated copy of *Pravda* behind display cases that everyone could read. That seemed nice and democratic, but obviously it was only *Pravda* you could read.

I want to drill down a bit into what has happened with Russian Government domination of domestic media since then, and how pluralist things have become. I guess I went in the glasnost era. When I went on a delegation to China, we were all told, "Don't take your normal phone; get a burner phone." There were equivalents of Facebook and all those things—We Chat and things. You mentioned Telegram—I do not even know what that is. I wonder if you could tell us more about what has happened since 1989. You mentioned that there are fake talk shows. Are those alongside real talk shows? How does it operate now?

Vera Tolz: It is, of course, a long period with different stages. In 1989, glasnost was already in full swing. People could consume all sorts of information apart from *Pravda* then. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed and there was a decade under President Yeltsin when there was, simply put, freedom of information and freedom of the press. There were issues around funding and the role of money in creating particular spin, but that was the best and freest era of the media.

When Putin came to power in 2000, he started to impose control on the media straight away—firstly on television, because television was the main source of information and news. The situation as Putin continued as President of Russia became worse and worse in terms of media control. To me, a major change was 2012, after the demonstrations against Putin standing for the third term. Clearly, the Kremlin was scared by those demonstrations. At that time, the approach to reporting changed. There started to be less pluralism and even staged pluralism. As I said, the number of talk shows increased dramatically on television, and all the time, organised campaigns around certain issues of sensitivity and relevance to the Kremlin started to be organised. You had different actors co-ordinating their efforts from state television and clandestine troll factories.

Until 2010, the Kremlin paid, they think now, insufficient attention to the digital area—the internet and social media, which started to emerge then. Famously Putin said in 2010 that the internet and social media does not matter—it is all porn; it is not politically important. Then, the realisation that this is an important area kicked in, so the troll factory was organised in St Petersburg first and then in other areas.

What the Kremlin started doing was flooding the digital space with their own content. But we should remember the difference with China. China created its own internet and its own social media from the start. That is why Twitter and Facebook will not work in China and never did, unless maybe somebody tried to get a VPN. China has a complete firewall around



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its digital space. Russia started with an open internet, so a completely different model. That is now creating a problem for Russia. They started to introduce laws to create their own sovereign internet, but it is not working very well, because that is not the model that they have. Telegram is a social media channel that was set up by two Russian IT specialists, but it became a global channel. Now both the Durov brothers, the inventors of Telegram, are long abroad—they defected, basically, from Russia, because the state wanted to confiscate their assets and tried to put the channel under its control. After 24 February, the Russian Government blocked Facebook, Twitter and also Instagram yesterday or the day before yesterday. They are attempting to also block YouTube. So far, Telegram is functioning. In 2018—

Chair: I'm really sorry, Vera. You were asked a very open question, but we are going to have to move on.

Vera Tolz: I'm sorry. One can give a whole lecture on the history of Russian media.

Chair: I would be delighted to receive that lecture at another time. Thank you very much. Dr Huq, do you have any other questions?

Q36 **Dr Huq:** I wondered if you had heard that people are nominating Marina Ovsyannikova for the Nobel peace prize. Overnight, there has been news that that was staged by the Russians to detract from the razing to the ground of civilian targets. Is there a comment on that?

Vera Tolz: To be honest, no. I actually do not believe that.

Chair: I think possibly Rebecca Skippage would be a better person to respond—she is on the ground, so to speak.

Rebecca Skippage: I haven't seen the comment on it being staged. Gosh, I hate giving a definite; I would be really surprised if it was.

Q37 **Chair:** It is one where the red alert comes up with disinformation when you hear that one.

Rebecca Skippage: Yes.

Chair: We are going to have to move on, because the Minister can only stay with us until 12.15. I am going to have to move on to Damian Green, and then we are going to have to end the session.

Q38 **Damian Green:** I have two questions. One is about Ofcom. Because decisions inside the EU took RT and Sputnik off the air, did Ofcom ever come to a decision on the decision that the Government said, probably rightly, was yours, not theirs? Did you ever reach that decision, or did it happen anyway, so you ducked it?

Kevin Bakhurst: We haven't ducked it. It has happened—you are right—practically, because of the EU actions. We are actively considering now whether RT remains fit and proper to hold a licence.

Q39 **Damian Green:** So you will come to a decision.



Kevin Bakhurst: We will come to a decision.

Q40 **Damian Green:** Because the BBC has already been, as it were, shut down in Russia, that will not make much practical difference to your operations.

Kevin Bakhurst: This is one of the things we have to consider. The BBC has not been totally shut down. It still has a number of journalists operating in Russia. It is not within our statutory remit, as part of the decision, to consider that, but clearly we don't operate in a vacuum and we have to be aware what the consequences of our decisions are.

Q41 **Damian Green:** The other question is perhaps to Rebecca, Vera and Keir. It is about Russian media literacy, if you like—not so much capacity to interpret, but ability to get. Do we have any idea what percentage of Russians actually have access to independent media so that they can at least make up their mind whether they are receiving propaganda or not?

Rebecca Skippage: I don't. Keir, is that something that you know?

Keir Giles: There are various estimates, but unfortunately they are all slightly misleading because they give a picture that does not correspond to how Russians are likely to react to information they receive from outside. If you are a Russian who is a viewer of state television, you have been subjected, as Vera described, to 10 years of very consistent propaganda forming a world view that is completely unrecognisable from anything that we understand as a reality. If, on the other hand, you are a Russian who takes an interest in what's happening in the outside world and wants to find out for themselves, you have found that there have been progressively more and more obstacles placed in your way. You need to not only actively seek out foreign news, but you also need to speak a foreign language, because Russia has put in place a service called InoSMI, which stands for foreign media, a monopoly on news from outside which translates into Russian but selectively, partially and in a way that suits Russian state narratives.

Vera talked about the awakening of Russia to the problem of social media. It recognised it as a threat far earlier than we did, because it saw it as a vulnerability, because news and information can come into Russia from the outside world, and this is a country that has always seen that as a problem. After all, from time to time they banned the import and possession of foreign books. As Vera said, there was no great firewall of Russia because it started off with an open system and it has taken retroactive measures to try to wall Russian citizens off. The problem is that you will not be getting any movement between those two audiences—those who are convinced by Russian state media, by the television propaganda channels, and those who do not believe them because they already have access, limited and dwindling, to the outside world through social media.

The huge challenge, and one that people come back to again and again, is how to reach that audience that Russia has already successfully cut off. We see some crowdsourcing initiatives, direct phoning into Russia, directly attempting to contact ordinary Russians, in particular the relatives of



soldiers who are on the frontline in Ukraine to tell them the truth about what is going on. But as Rebecca has already explained, sometimes they are so inculcated, so deep in the propaganda world that has been created for them, that they simply do not believe what they are hearing.

Q42 **Damian Green:** In terms of the first group, that are successfully getting independent information, do we have any idea of what percentage that is, and what the percentage is for the second group you described—those who would like that information if they could get it? Do we know what percentage of the population that is?

Keir Giles: Internet penetration has been especially high in Russia, particularly in urban areas. It is a very online population but that does not mean that it shares an information space with the rest of the world, particularly because of the measures that have been put in place—not just the Russian equivalents of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and so on, but the fact that they operate in their own information bubble, in exactly the same way as audiences in the west do. When you see optimistic statistics saying that the vast number of Russians are on social media, that has to be taken with the understanding that that does not necessarily mean that they are interacting with the outside world and with outside audiences.

Q43 **Damian Green:** Vera, do you know any percentages, or is that simply impossible?

Vera Tolz: Percentages of those who regularly consume alternative media—there is also a Russophone, anti-Putin network—are very small. That is very clear. That is why that media were allowed to exist until 24 February, and could be reached, because the numbers did not constitute a problem for the Kremlin.

I was trying to find out anything about opinion polls now. There is virtually no information. Do I have a minute?

Chair: Yes, you have a minute.

Vera Tolz: Colleagues of mine who have a big project on surveying opinion in Ukraine and Russia—the project is led by Harvard University—yesterday gave me, with a huge caveat, an optimistic statistic. I do not know whether to believe it or not, but on the second day of war, only 14% of Russians believed that Russia was at fault at all, and two days ago, it was up to 37% who were in doubt. Whether that is true, I cannot say, nor actually, because it is now so difficult to survey the public in Russia, can my Harvard colleagues. But they were saying that even if the figure of 37% is not entirely correct, there is a trajectory towards doubt.

Chair: That is a nice and encouraging note to finish on. I thank our witnesses. We are now going to conclude this session. We will take a short adjournment of about two minutes as we set up our second panel. Thank you again.

Examination of witness

Witness: Nigel Huddleston.

Chair: Welcome to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Sub-Committee. On our first panel, we heard about Russian disinformation; now, we have moved on to sports governance and Russia and other nations. We are joined by Nigel Huddleston, the Minister for Sport. Good morning, Nigel. Thank you for joining us.

Nigel Huddleston: Good morning.

Chair: Just before we begin, I wish to declare that I have accepted hospitality from Manchester United football club in the last 12 months.

Damian Green: I have accepted hospitality from the Premier League.

Steve Brine: I have accepted hospitality from Tottenham Hotspur. It was a thoroughly miserable evening.

Q44 **Chair:** Well, it is Spurs. Minister, first of all, I am tempted to ask you what it is like to run a football club—whether or not you’ve got your sheepskin coat—but I just want to know what you thought, having taken on the role that you have, when you saw that the first fixture was between Chelsea, which has the Roman Abramovich and Putin connection, and Newcastle United, with its connections with the Saudis, who have just executed 81 men. What were your thoughts when you saw that fixture popping up?

Nigel Huddleston: First of all, it’s good to see everybody today. I should probably make it very clear where we are with Chelsea at the moment: the Government do not own Chelsea; the assets have been frozen; the club is potentially up for sale.

In terms of what you’re alluding to, I think the whole issue of who owns sport has been a hot topic for many years. I recognise that. It was a topic in the fan-led review, which we will be responding to shortly. The point about the owners and directors test, in particular, is important; I am sure that you will also talk to the Premier League about that. We recognise there is need for movement there. A couple of weeks ago, the Secretary of State said in the Chamber of the House of Commons that that will be part of the Government response to the fan-led review. I probably can’t say too much more on that, although you’ll probably prompt me a little more. However, I can’t formally respond to the review.

Q45 **Chair:** I think we do need to be told a little more on that, in particular on the fan-led review. Reading the review, it looks as though it would not have stopped the Saudi takeover; it wouldn’t have stopped Roman Abramovich from taking over. It seems to be based on the fact that if you have enough money, you can buy a football club. Is that really the right way to go, or should there be a stricter outlook in terms of the integrity of the ownership of a football club?

Nigel Huddleston: First of all, any transactions between private sector entities are commercial transactions within the law in the UK, but also in



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some cases subject to the restrictions, rules and guidance of governing bodies or other entities—in this case, the Premier League. The Government did not make decisions relating to those acquisitions, but those were subject to the Premier League's own owners and directors test. The Premier League is also assessing that test. What I can say is that we recognise the need for further refinement and for a more robust owners and directors test. The integrity element of that is something that is being pushed. We will be responding pretty soon on that.

Q46 Chair: To put pressure on you on that, the fan-led review is about the financing; it is not about the integrity aspect.

Nigel Huddleston: Again, if you will forgive me, I will not respond here today to all the elements of the fan-led review. The team are still working on that. We will make an announcement in due course. The Secretary of State has said, however, that the response to the fan-led review will most likely include elements about the owners and directors test, along with the announcement that we will have an independent regulator. The precise role of the owners and directors test within that, and the elements of it, is something that we will be making further comment on—

Chair: Do you envisage the fan-led review—

Nigel Huddleston: We have heard a lot of comments about the integrity element, and I think there are valid concerns about it.

Q47 Chair: Are we to take from that, in effect, that you will beef up Tracey Crouch's proposals on the ownership of football clubs?

Nigel Huddleston: You will hear the formal response to the fan-led review soon. You will understand, and I know exactly where you are coming from, but I cannot pre-empt those findings. We will be giving them soon. The team have been working very hard—

Q48 Chair: It sounds as if the Secretary of State has already pre-empted that to a degree, so are you not willing—

Nigel Huddleston: No, we have been saying for a while that we recognise, and that the Premier League recognises, that the owners and directors test at the moment needs further work. It needs to be more robust. The exact elements of that are something we are working on. Further information will come out along with further information about the role of a regulator in our formal response, which will come shortly. As I say, I know what you are trying to get today, but I cannot say much more than that. I am happy to come back to you once we have released it.

Q49 Chair: Minister, what we are trying to get at is the legitimate concerns nationwide about how this situation has been allowed to come about. Kicking it into the long grass—to mix my football metaphors—is probably not the way to go on this occasion. Surely you can at least come out with a little bit to suggest that there should also be an element of integrity when it comes to who owns a football club, not just about the financing and “Can you afford it?”



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Nigel Huddleston: As I said, we will be responding formally. The Secretary of State did say that we need the owners and directors test to be more robust. That will be part of our response to the review, but I will not give the details of that today. In fact, we are still working on it, but it is very important. As I say, I hear what fans have said in my role and from Tracey Crouch's review. The integrity element, I think, is important. I know it is a hot topic in sport. It goes beyond just football but, as it relates to football, we will announce more in due course.

Q50 **Chair:** Simon Jordan, the former Palace owner, suggested that Roman Abramovich had been good for the Chelsea trophy cabinet, but was one of the worst things to happen to English football. Do you agree?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, as I have written to you before, in terms of the particular elements related to sanctions of individuals, I cannot say too much today—

Chair: Minister, forgive me, this is not about sanctions; this is your opinion of whether Roman Abramovich has been good or bad for English football.

Nigel Huddleston: We welcome investment in the UK, but all investment in the UK, in particular as it relates to sports, has to be legal and subject to various tests. That has been the case. We recognise that there is a need for more improvements, but it is important as well that we make sure that we continue to have a robust and very successful football ecosystem in the UK. The Premier League is a major global success story and an outstanding export earner for the UK, and we welcome investment.

Chair: So you have no opinion—

Nigel Huddleston: The point about the fitness of owners is a valid one, which you are making here today. As I said, it is important that we look at—we will be looking at—that as part of the response to the fan-led review.

Chair: So you have no view of whether Roman Abramovich has been good or bad for English football.

Nigel Huddleston: I will not be drawn on individuals today, I am sorry. I know exactly where you are coming from, and the fact is that Roman Abramovich has been sanctioned and has been sanctioned for a reason—because he has links to Vladimir Putin. That is signal itself that, in terms of his fitness to run a club, that is clearly not the case now. In terms of the historical investment, I cannot comment much further, but I can say that the fact that he has been sanctioned at the moment speaks for itself.

Q51 **Chair:** How does the national game rediscover its soul, Nigel?

Nigel Huddleston: I think we are at a turning point in English football. The fan-led review is pivotally important. We recognise that there are failures in the structure and governance of English football. If it were all working perfectly, we would never have needed the fan-led review. It is a



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manifesto commitment that I stood on and that many of us stood on, and in fact, cross-party, there was recognition of the need for significant changes in football governance in England. I think the fan-led review will be pivotal because it will contain an independent regulator, which is a fundamental change in the structure and ecosystem of English football, and it will include further information and measures around the owners and directors test. That itself says quite a lot.

Q52 Chair: Any rumours that No. 10 had thought that perhaps the fan-led review was too much trouble this side of the election and wanted to put it in a future manifesto, that was nonsense; you are going to crack on with this. When are you actually going to get moving in the fan-led review and bring it before Parliament?

Nigel Huddleston: We have launched the fan-led review. It has taken place and Tracey has written her report. We will be responding very soon.

Q53 Chair: Yes, but when will the Bill come forward?

Nigel Huddleston: That is a matter that we are having discussions on at the moment in terms of parliamentary schedules and timetables. One of the most important things, as well, to recognise—you as a Committee have said this again and again, and I completely agree—is that many recommendations in the fan-led review do not and will not require legislation. Football itself can sort out quite a lot of the issues that exist today and it should do that. So we should not just wait for legislation. I am hoping and expecting that we will see considerable changes without the need for legislation. We will need legislation to set up a regulator.

Q54 Chair: Can you definitely assure this Committee that any legislation that results from the fan-led review will be before the House before the next general election? Can you assure this Committee that that is the case?

Nigel Huddleston: I cannot promise the timescales of legislation, but there is no intent to kick this into the long grass or delay it. It is incredibly complex; you know that, I know that. This is not easy. We are going to be setting up a regulator, and that requires primary legislation. So there will be a need for us to legislate in the House of Commons. The timing of it is something we are discussing at the moment. I would like to see it as soon as possible and, of course, the Secretary of State has said the same, but we have to find time in the legislative timetable.

Q55 Chair: Final question from me: on, have you seen the legal assurances from the Premier League or that the Premier League has received concerning the Saudi ownership of Newcastle United? How confident are you that the Premier League will take action if it shows that the Saudi state has considerable involvement in Newcastle United?

Nigel Huddleston: I am not sure what you are referring to, so I cannot comment on this.

Q56 Chair: Well, the Premier League has received assurances from the consortium owning Newcastle United that, effectively, the Saudi state will not be involved in the running of the club. Have you seen such



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assurances, have you asked any questions of the Premier League in that respect and can you inform the Committee in that regard?

Nigel Huddleston: Chair, the integrity in the owners and directors test element is the responsibility of the Premier League, and the acquisition was done legally.

Q57 **Chair:** You are the Minister for Sport. I would have thought that on something as controversial as the Saudi takeover of Newcastle United, you would see any assurances that they had given to the Premier League in terms of keeping the Saudi Government out of the running of Newcastle United.

Nigel Huddleston: Chairman, any acquisition, as I said, needs to be done legally and according to the laws. The owners and directors test was applied by the Premier League. I know that there are questions about the rigorousness of it, but that is a decision for the Premier League. I think one of the problems we have at the moment is the expectation that Government get hugely involved in all things, including all elements of sport. There is a responsibility of sport and sport governing bodies to do the right thing and also to keep their house in order. We recognise the failings and that there is therefore a requirement for further intervention, which is precisely why we had the fan-led review and precisely why we are putting in the governance changes.

Q58 **Chair:** Will you now ask the Premier League for the details of the assurances it says it has received? This was absolutely crucial to the deal that was done in terms of the takeover of Newcastle, and I imagine it is a matter of extreme public interest. There should be oversight by the Government.

Nigel Huddleston: Mr Chairman, you are asking me to give an in-depth response to something that I cannot. What I will say is that I will write to you about that.

Q59 **Chair:** Okay. Will you be writing to the Premier League?

Nigel Huddleston: I will be writing to you once I have got to the details of the underlying question that you are getting at.

Q60 **Simon Jupp:** We have seen a wide raft of sporting sanctions announced over the last couple of weeks. In your conversations with the industry and, I am sure, with bodies elsewhere in Europe and further afield, how long do you think that global sport and sport here will accept such sanctions and support them?

Nigel Huddleston: You are right; sport responded quickly to the situation in Ukraine. I am very proud that it responded so quickly, with real leadership from Great Britain, including from many governing bodies that then put pressure on international bodies. We have worked with Sports Ministers and Governments around the world to encourage that strong response. We had a meeting of 20-something Sports Ministers. More than 30 signed up to a declaration that made it very clear that Russia and Belarus were global pariahs, in both sport and the cultural arena more



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broadly. Those sanctions will last as long as Russia continues to be a pariah on the world stage. Nobody knows how long that will be. The person who is in control of that is Vladimir Putin. They will last, I think, for some time. They include Russia not being able to bid for major sporting events now that will happen many years in the future. I think it is going to be quite a while before we accept Russia back on to the world sporting stage.

Q61 Simon Jupp: I hate to ask this question, but money talks. Is that really a sustainable position long term?

Nigel Huddleston: There is a lot of money in the global sporting environment; it is a major economic contributor, and a lot of jobs and taxes are generated through sport. It is not just fun—it goes way beyond the game. Globally there is a lot of money in sport, and there is a lot of money in football, and I think we can manage perfectly well without Russian investment overall. There are plenty of other investors around the world we can work with.

Q62 Simon Jupp: Russia used sport to get on the world stage and be recognised as a developing nation and a reasonable country—up until the last couple of weeks. Do you really think that all the people who have signed up to the sanctions, and signed the declaration you just mentioned, will still be adhering to that in six months' time?

Nigel Huddleston: That is entirely up to Vladimir Putin.

Q63 Simon Jupp: It's not though, is it? It is up to those countries. If the financial pressure becomes too tight on some clubs and other sporting institutions—perhaps not in this country but elsewhere—will they cave?

Nigel Huddleston: I think there is a very strong global consensus on the measures that we are asking sports to take, including not competing and not giving sporting events to Russia and Belarus. That also extends to sponsorship and investment. There is actually a lot of activity to remove that sponsorship and investment. I really cannot see circumstances for quite a long period of time in which we would welcome that money back—I genuinely can't. I do not think it would be morally acceptable; in many cases it may not be legally possible, because we will still have considerable sanctions imposed on many entities. I do not think that sports fans around the world, and in particular in this country, would find that acceptable. They have spoken very loudly and clearly; sport has come out incredibly well in its show of support for the people of Ukraine. The idea that the mood is likely to change in the near future is highly unlikely.

Q64 Simon Jupp: I am glad to hear you say that. Do you think that the response from the sporting community, here and across the globe, to the events of the last couple of weeks is a wake-up call for global sport to consider how it interacts with nations that have dubious human rights records?

Nigel Huddleston: Most of my job as Sports Minister is spent on governance and related issues and concerns in sport. That occupies the vast majority of this Committee's time, as well. There are problems, both



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domestically and internationally, with the governance of sport and sport investment. You are right that there has been a bit of a wake-up call here, particularly as it related to Russian investment. I think the mood is changing and we are at the cusp of quite significant change in sport.

Q65 Simon Jupp: How do you see that change evolving? How do you see it actually being put into practice?

Nigel Huddleston: We will be leading the way, in some ways, by setting up an independent regulator. We will be making more information on the precise remit of that regulator available shortly. But I think other countries are also looking at the way they see sponsorship in sport and investments from entities around the world. It is not just the UK implementing sanctions on Russian oligarchs and others who have related activities. This is happening around the world, and it has implications for all industries, including sport, that can be very visible. You are right, actually: the reason the sporting sanctions matter is precisely that Putin loves nothing better than wrapping himself in the flag and putting himself on the world stage. That is precisely why it was absolutely right for the International Paralympic Committee to make sure that the Russians could not do that at the recent games. That was the right decision.

Q66 Simon Jupp: Given the good work that has been going on to make sure that countries are united on this, if countries fall away because the money talks too loudly, will we call them out?

Nigel Huddleston: I certainly will.

Q67 Steve Brine: Hello, Nigel; thanks for coming along. Can I ask you about the financial impact on British sport of the sanctions that have been imposed? Have the Government considered that impact? Has an impact assessment been done? I know you have not published such a thing but, within your office, has the impact of such sanctions on British sport been assessed?

Nigel Huddleston: I don't want to sound obtuse here, but sanctions are the decision of another Department—in this case, FCDO. The elements, particularly as they relate to the impact on Chelsea, are driven by the licensing, which is led by the Treasury, but DCMS is obviously involved in the conversations here. It is really important to understand that we are imposing sanctions in response to an illegal invasion of Ukraine—we have to remember the context here—by Vladimir Putin, who is causing chaos, havoc, destruction and the death of innocent people. In response, and quite quickly, the UK and the world put sanctions in place. Those sanctions are to freeze the assets of individuals and entities with links to Putin, but they will inevitably have a consequence for, and an impact on, domestic economies, including in the UK.

It should not be a surprise that when Roman Abramovic was sanctioned, it had an impact, because the sanctions mean that you cannot generate additional revenue. That has had an impact on ticket sales, merchandise and so on. Yes, there is an impact. How big that impact is—did we work that out in advance? No, but what we are doing is working with Chelsea,



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and of course the fans, to see how we can make sure that the measures that we have put in place primarily impact on Roman Abramovic and make sure that he does not benefit, while making sure that, where possible, we can reduce the impact on the fans and make sure that Chelsea can still continue. I think that is the important context here, because this is a response to a global crisis.

Q68 Steve Brine: Absolutely, and I think the Government's response has been swift, robust and all the things that the public expected it to be in respect of sport. Sport has then done its bit in response. We all know the reasons it was done. The fact that it has a negative impact on British sport is not a reason not to do it. In the same way, we could stop our reliance on Russian gas tomorrow if we wanted, but do our constituents want to pay £4,500-a-year energy bills? It is a debate that I guess we need to have with the public, if we are being honest. Would the Government allow a football club to go bust because it gave up sponsorship from a Russian firm? Are football clubs too big to fail?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, we have enough facts to deal with, without going into hypotheticals here. Can the Government allow an entity to fail? Yes, it can—whether it is sport, football or anything else—but what we want to do is make sure that the impact of sanctions hits those who we want to feel the impact. They are not intended to harm other entities or the overall sports ecosystem, which is precisely why—talking specifically about Chelsea—we have the licence, so that the club can continue to operate. Some other entities rely more on sponsorship. Again, many have withdrawn or frozen that sponsorship if there are links with Russia or Russian entities. That is the right thing to do. I don't believe that, as a direct consequence of that, it is threatening the viability of the entity. They are going to have to look for alternative sources of sponsorship, which I think in many cases will be available. In the case of Chelsea, what you have seen the Government do is recognise that the sanctions will have an impact, yet simultaneously and immediately make sure that there was a licence so the club could survive and indeed, hopefully, still be sold. Then we will be out of some of the difficulties.

Q69 Steve Brine: I think that is very clear. The reason I ask is that the Government were very muscular and stepped in to protect the beautiful game. Fans were very grateful. When the European Super League was mooted and that then threatened fans' access to their clubs, the Prime Minister said we would do whatever it took, including legislation, to stop it. I am just saying that the Government are feeling quite interventionist in protecting the national sport.

Nigel Huddleston: The fact that we have had the fan-led review and are proposing an independent regulator and looking at elements including owners and directors has shown that we recognise that sport, and football in particular, is vitally important to our local communities and local heritage. There are huge, strong, emotional attachments and therefore it requires intervention in a way that some other things don't.

Q70 Steve Brine: Okay, that makes sense. Which sports do you think are



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most in danger due to lost funding as a result of sanctions? Wider than football, which sports are on your worry list? What assessment has been made?

Nigel Huddleston: We are looking at this, and actually the sports governing bodies have been very good, not only in terms of the response to international games and events but also in looking at the impact there. We are currently looking at the impact of withdrawal of sponsorship, in particular, across the board.

I am not aware of any sport that is truly facing an existential threat, because the ecosystem is actually quite fluid and fragmented in terms of sponsorship and support. But there are individual entities that we have particular concern about, Chelsea being the utmost.

Q71 **Steve Brine:** Moving away from football, would you as Sports Minister be comfortable if the world's No. 1 men's tennis player came and played at Wimbledon this year?

Nigel Huddleston: This is a really important point because globally, or at least in many countries around the world, we have agreed that we will not allow representatives from Russia to compete. There are also visa implications here.

When it comes to individuals, it gets a bit more complex. We are looking at this, and talking to various sports about this, in terms of what the response and requirements should be. Absolutely, no one flying the flag for Russia should be allowed or enabled. Many sports people have dual or multiple citizenships; many would be willing and able to compete as non-aligned, non-flag bearing entities.

However, I think it goes beyond that. We need some potential assurance that they are not supporters of Vladimir Putin, and we are considering what requirements we may need to get some assurances along those lines. In short, would I be comfortable with a Russian athlete flying the Russian flag winning? No, and I don't think anybody in this Chamber would.

Q72 **Steve Brine:** You are talking to the All England Club about that, are you?

Nigel Huddleston: We are in discussions.

Q73 **Steve Brine:** Okay. So if the then world No. 1 could not play in the Australian Open because he exercised his legitimate right not to have a covid vaccine, then being a supporter of a country that has invaded a sovereign country in a hostile act would be a problem, wouldn't it?

Nigel Huddleston: I think you have just answered your own question. I don't think that would be acceptable.

Q74 **Steve Brine:** Finally, do you think there will be more examples like China or other countries deciding not to broadcast British sporting events and, bluntly, are we bothered?



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Nigel Huddleston: External rights management, international rights, are hugely important to sport. It is a major export earner for the UK economy. As I said earlier on, the Premier League is a particular case in point here.

Sport should bring people together, and it does bring people together. It unites us. It is a truly global language. I would like to see the power of sport do exactly that around the world. Also, the soft power elements of flying our flag internationally are very strong. So, where possible, I will always be an advocate for international rights and sales, unless that is inappropriate, as is the case currently in Russia, where the withdrawal of Premier League rights, for example, was the right thing to do. I think that, where appropriate, we should be exploiting the intellectual property of our sports entities around the world.

Steve Brine: That is very clear. Thank you.

Q75 **Julie Elliott:** Good morning, Nigel. Why did the Government not act on Abramovich's ownership of Chelsea when the 2019 Home Office report came out? This discussed, among other things, "his links to the Russian state and his public association with corrupt activity and practices."

Nigel Huddleston: Again, I'm afraid—you will be aware that the sanctions are led by FCDO. As I wrote to the Committee, with respect, I cannot comment in detail about the sanctions and the particular details of the sanctions decisions.

Q76 **Julie Elliott:** But this is not about sanctions; this is actually about why the Government did not act on something that was known before.

Nigel Huddleston: Well, you are asking me why we did not sanction him earlier, and that is actually a decision for another Government Department, which I do not control. So, as I say, with respect, I cannot really comment on that.

In terms of what has changed—well, to state the obvious, the invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally changed things, which is why the world is responding and reacting by adding lots more people to the sanctions regime—

Julie Elliott: It hasn't changed the way—

Nigel Huddleston: And effort and energy are being put into investigating individuals that were perhaps not on the radar previously.

Q77 **Julie Elliott:** To say that Abramovich would not have been on the radar is perhaps not quite—

Nigel Huddleston: No, I didn't say he wasn't on—

Q78 **Julie Elliott:** Well, my question was about Abramovich.

Nigel Huddleston: Ms Elliott, as I said, I did write to the Committee, with respect, saying that I could not go into detail on this. You are also asking me a question that is relevant to another Minister. With respect, I suggest you ask another Minister.



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Q79 **Julie Elliott:** Are you aware of any similar reports on other Premier League owners?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, because the sanctions are decided by FCDO, I literally cannot comment further on this.

Q80 **Julie Elliott:** Are you aware of any other similar reports?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, Ms Elliott, I cannot comment on—

Q81 **Julie Elliott:** But this is not about what the FCDO has done. This is about: are you aware, as a Minister in this Government, of any other, similar reports on Premier League owners or are you not aware? That is a very straightforward question.

Nigel Huddleston: Ms Elliott, I did, with respect, write to the Committee, laying out that I cannot answer questions relating to particular sanctions.

Q82 **Julie Elliott:** But I don't think the questions I am asking are what your letter was about.

Nigel Huddleston: The letter was quite straightforward. It said that I am not responsible for sanctions, and therefore asking me questions about sanctions, which are the responsibility of another Government Minister—

Julie Elliott: But I have never mentioned sanctions.

Nigel Huddleston: I am aware, of course, of there being questions, as we discussed earlier on this, about ownership of sporting entities that have been raised: they have been around for quite a while. In response to that, hopefully I gave you some assurance that we are aware of those concerns and therefore take them seriously and will be looking at elements of that in response to the fan-led review as it relates to the owners' and directors' test. I am afraid I cannot really be drawn much more on this. Sorry to be unco-operative in this area.

Q83 **Julie Elliott:** Has DCMS made any assessment about Abramovich's influence on Britain through Chelsea football club?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, you are asking me a question that relates to the sanctions regime. I cannot really—

Q84 **Julie Elliott:** I have not mentioned sanctions! You keep mentioning sanctions; I have not mentioned sanctions. I asked this question: has a Department you are a Minister in made any assessment of Abramovich's influence on Britain through his ownership of Chelsea football club? That has nothing to do with sanctions.

Nigel Huddleston: Well, it depends on what you mean by "influence on Britain". As an owner of a major Premier League club, he clearly has had some influence both directly on Chelsea and more broadly. I think it is self-evident that he has had some impact. In terms of what that assessment is, what I can say is that given the context of the despicable invasion of Ukraine and the links that Abramovich has to the regime that—in response to that, we have sanctioned him and his assets are frozen.



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That speaks for itself. That shows that that level of investment and engagement is unacceptable, and we have therefore sanctioned him. I don't think I can say much more.

Q85 Julie Elliott: Can I ask you finally about someone else—Alisher Usmanov? Have you any concerns about the previous involvement of that gentleman in English football?

Nigel Huddleston: Sorry, I missed that.

Julie Elliott: Alisher Usmanov—have you any concerns about that gentleman's involvement in English football?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, if it relates to—

Q86 Chair: Minister, with respect, I completely get why you wish to not discuss specific sanctions. I think what Julie and other members of the Committee are trying to get at is basically this. Have the Government been asleep on the watch while the Premier League has been used for the purposes of sportswashing and potential money laundering? That is the question we are asking.

Nigel Huddleston: As it relates to Usmanov, I understand that Everton and the sponsorship relationships have been discontinued, as a response. He has been sanctioned. I understand that Everton has suspended if not completely broken the sponsorship relationship there. In terms of the appropriateness of them doing that, they have obviously done the right thing.

Q87 Julie Elliott: Did you have concerns about the gentleman?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, I—

Q88 Julie Elliott: I am not asking you about sanctions. Honestly, were there any alarm bells ringing?

Nigel Huddleston: When I was on this Committee, these issues came up again and again—you are absolutely right. Investment, and who owns our sport, is something that we did need to look at. That is one of the purposes of the fan-led review. One of the elements is who owns our sporting entities and how they are assessed, and the owners and directors element of that. Partly why we have had the review is to look at these issues of governance. They are long standing. We are going to be responding shortly to it.

I completely understand the concerns. I think it is perfectly fine and reasonable to question who owns what, including on behalf of constituents and sports fans. Sports fans across the country tend to be quite vocal about who owns their clubs. I get it, from an ethical point of view as well. People do express and have expressed concerns.

Q89 Clive Efford: Yesterday, there was an urgent question in the House on the 81 murders that took place in Saudi Arabia over the weekend. In answer to a question on whether the Saudi Arabian investment fund was a "right, proper and fit-for-purpose owner of Newcastle United", the



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Minister, Amanda Milling, said, "We"—meaning the Government. She read this statement; it wasn't just something she answered, she was reading—"welcome the purchase of Newcastle United".

Do you welcome the purchase of Newcastle United by the Saudi Arabian investment fund?

Nigel Huddleston: Saudi Arabia is an important partner of the UK, across multiple areas, including investment, intelligence, culture and other elements. That purchase was a commercial decision that the Government did not take part in. It was a commercial decision that was within the law and that was within the restrictions of the owners and directors test for the Premier League. There was no need for the Government to get involved in that. The owners and directors test was applied.

Whether that test should be reviewed and assessed in the future—I get that we are having that debate today, and it will be ongoing, but Amanda stated the Government's position.

Q90 **Clive Efford:** So you welcome the Saudi Arabian investment fund purchasing Newcastle United.

You said in your answers earlier that the fan-led review is pivotal and you think this is a major point of change. If we are going to continue to have investment from individuals such as Roman Abramovich and others in the future—similar to them, but not them specifically—do we not have to have a fit and proper person test that goes beyond what is in the fan-led review?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, I am sure the Committee will contribute to the ongoing debate about the fan-led review and the elements, scope and responsibilities of a regulator, and the revisions to the owners and directors test. I think you are making a fair point, which I have some sympathy for, but I cannot announce the details of the fan-led review here today. I understand the point you are making and it is a fair point.

Q91 **Clive Efford:** Excellent. We can assume from that answer that you are in discussions with other Departments about taking the owners and directors assessment beyond what is in the fan-led review.

Nigel Huddleston: I cannot predict what you are assuming, Mr Efford. All I can say is that we are looking at things and I understand the point you are making.

Q92 **Clive Efford:** You know whether you are in discussion with those Departments or not. You can save me from assuming—

Nigel Huddleston: There are multiple areas of the fan-led review that have implications for other Government Departments, and we are in conversations with other Government Departments about—

Q93 **Clive Efford:** And that includes?

Nigel Huddleston: I cannot say much more than I have said already, I am afraid, but we will be responding shortly to the fan-led review.



Q94 Clive Efford: I am just going to push you once more—and I may push you again if the answer is not good. I am not asking you to tell me what you are thinking about; I am just asking you to confirm what has been exposed over the last few weeks—and for a number of years, as Julie Elliott’s questions clearly showed. Abramovich, in a legal action, admitted that he got much of his wealth through corruption—it is there in representations made before the court—yet the Government did not act on that. There is a need for the fit and proper person test to move to a level that will prevent people from using their ill-gotten gains to buy influence through football clubs and other things. I just want to know that the Government are aware of that and looking at it.

Nigel Huddleston: I am aware of the points you are making. As I said, the fit and proper person test—the owners and directors test, as it is often now called—is really important. It is not currently operating as I think we would all like it to operate, and therefore it needs change. It needs to be more robust. I completely understand the point about there being an integrity element of that, and we will be responding very shortly. I am afraid I cannot say any more than that. You are tempting me to announce some elements of the response to the fan-led review. This came up in the fan-led review, we have debated it in the Commons, and we have debated it multiple times here; I understand the points you are making.

Q95 Clive Efford: Okay. One of the other things that we are concerned about is football finance, going down the football pyramid. We have heard about the sanctions. I know you cannot talk about the details of sanctions, but they have financial implications for the game in the Premier League and the English football league, and for the FA. How do we protect vulnerable lower-level clubs from being affected by the money being cut off at the top? We have seen the greed of the Premier League and the way it looks after itself. What are we doing to make sure that the football pyramid is protected in these times?

Nigel Huddleston: Again, the fan-led review went into a fair degree of detail, and the whole distribution and the financial flows in football were a hot topic for the fans I spoke to up and down the country as well. There are no easy answers there, because it is very difficult to get consensus. It will be commented on in the response to the fan-led review, but that is an area in particular where I hope and expect the sporting bodies to sort this out themselves, because that is really important—or they have the opportunity to do that. As I say, we will be saying more in the response to the fan-led review, but this is something that, in an ideal world, the sporting entities would have sorted out themselves some while ago.

Q96 Clive Efford: Yes, but if they were capable of doing that, we wouldn’t have this, would we?

Nigel Huddleston: I think if they were capable of doing a lot of things we wouldn’t have had the fan-led review. I am afraid that I share your exasperation with football’s inability to solve some problems that really ought to be sitting with football to sort out itself.

Q97 Clive Efford: But it is now sitting with you, because there is a fan-led

review.

Nigel Huddleston: It is, and we will be responding to the fan-led review shortly.

Q98 **Clive Efford:** We cannot expect football to do it, because it is here in black and white in the fan-led review, which we need to implement.

Nigel Huddleston: No, we should and do expect football to recognise where the problems exist and, where possible, sort them out themselves without the Government having to come in and babysit and legislate on the nth degree of detail. Fans expect and require that as well, and I still expect football to take its share of responsibility. If it doesn't act, then we will legislate.

Q99 **Clive Efford:** Let me point out to you one area where that is just not possible. I believe that the FA and the Premier League are lobbying you to say that the FA should be the independent regulator for English football.

Nigel Huddleston: I get lobbied on all sorts of things all the time.

Q100 **Clive Efford:** Will you state here and now that that is not on the table? That is the system we have now.

Nigel Huddleston: I cannot say to you—as I said, I know this must be frustrating. I suspect I will be called back once we have launched the response to the fan-led review, and I would be happy to come back, but I cannot say more now, other than that there will be a regulator and we will be looking at the owners and directors test. We have said those things. There will be a regulator.

Q101 **Clive Efford:** That is not the FA?

Nigel Huddleston: The scope and the responsibilities of the regulator are important, and the owners and directors test will be an element of that. I really cannot say any more than that at the moment; otherwise, I am going to start, element by element, unpicking the response to the review, which we will be doing shortly.

Q102 **Clive Efford:** This is my last point. If you have read this, you cannot possibly be considering making the Football Association the independent regulator for English football, because the failures at the FA are right through this.

Nigel Huddleston: Again, with the greatest of respect, I am going to have to ask you to be patient for the review response.

Clive Efford: Okay.

Q103 **Damian Green:** Good afternoon. I want to explore more the distinction between countries and individuals. We talked about it a bit with Steve Brine in terms of athletes, but in terms of owners, you say that Russia and Belarus are now pariah states, and therefore even individual athletes are being treated differently. Does that apply to owners as well? Is any Russian or Belarusian owner of a football club now unacceptable in this

country?

Nigel Huddleston: Some individuals have obviously been sanctioned, and other countries are also sanctioning individuals. There is a lot of overlap, but it is not complete. For example, we sanctioned Roman Abramovich before the EU did yesterday, but there is some consensus on individuals and, of course, some entities. It is where there is proximity to the Russian state that we obviously have problems, as opposed to every single entity that exists in Russia. It is the close proximity to the Russian state that is particularly problematic, and we also have problems where there is representation of the Russian state in some form, which not only includes standing as a "Russian" athlete, but even those trying to go under some other flag that we all know is still Russia. As I say, that is going to last for a while.

Q104 **Damian Green:** Are you asking them, as it were, to denounce the war, or they will not be able to compete? Similarly with owners, would they have to deliberately—

Nigel Huddleston: It is precisely because of the "How could this work? What would be the mechanics?" issues that you're figuring out in your head now that we are also trying to work this out, working with sports and, indeed, other countries. It would be better if we could decide some broad global consensus on this and get agreement across multiple countries, but we are looking at the very issue of what we do with individuals, as Steve said earlier, and we are thinking about the implications.

I don't think people would accept people very clearly flying the Russian flag, particularly if there is any element of support or recognition of Putin and his regime. I don't think that would be acceptable. We are looking at the mechanics of how we could work on that for individuals, but we do not have a solution at this moment in time. We are having those conversations, and I have had those conversations with other Sports Ministers in other countries, who are struggling with exactly the same issue.

Q105 **Damian Green:** Almost more difficult, I think, is if you move down the hierarchy of undesirability to people who are not pariah states but are hugely controversial, like Saudi Arabia—we had a session in the House yesterday. I would also observe, in parenthesis, that that was based on the Saudi use of the death penalty. The USA uses the death penalty, and I suspect that all of us in this room would all disapprove of that, but I don't observe any great demands that Americans should not be allowed to own Premier League football clubs.

Steve Brine: Hear, hear.

Damian Green: I think there should be some collective view about where we strike moral stances in this country. More generally, with controversial countries, if the owner is closely associated with the Government there, are you going to look at those as well?

Nigel Huddleston: On an ongoing basis, we do have rules about who can invest in the UK. For anybody investing here, there are legal parameters and, on top of that, there are often additional investigations and requirements of governing bodies and so on, particularly as it relates to sport. This is an ongoing point, but in terms of how it relates specifically to the moment that we are facing in Ukraine, it is pretty clear cut, and there is a global consensus that we want to make sure that Russia and Belarus are global pariahs.

The broader issue of who should invest goes back to the point I made earlier. We recognise that, hence the need for a more robust owners and directors test in football.

Q106 Damian Green: You make the very good point that there are legal constraints on who can invest in this country, but the Government accept and, more broadly, society accepts that, for all sorts of emotional and community-importance reasons, actually investing in professional sports clubs requires a different and, in some ways, more exclusive test than simply investing in a widget factory or an IT firm, or something like that. Do you accept that?

Nigel Huddleston: I do, but I also accept that some people would look on some individuals with a different view from the person standing next to them. It does get very complex. It needs that specific individual assessment, hence things like owners and directors' tests are important, and questions about integrity are fair ones to raise—

Q107 Damian Green: Sorry to interrupt, but I am not talking about individual integrity here; I am very specifically saying: are you going to try to devise a system where it is not just your own individual integrity, but whether you happen to come from a country that we turn against?

Nigel Huddleston: I think I understand where you are coming from there. I think you will also understand that who we allow investments from around the world if you are talking more about Government or related entities is a higher, macro decision about all investments and is, therefore, about entities that go beyond sport and are more an issue for the FCDO, Treasury and BEIS, rather than me directly. Within sport, wherever and whenever we can, we raise issues about whether these people are appropriate individuals to invest in things that we have a strong emotional attachment and that are particularly important to our constituents.

Q108 Damian Green: I am asking about precisely the point you just made. We can say that we want the Saudis, the Chinese and, in previous times, the Russians and that we don't mind them investing in our industry, but actually we want to put some rules on sport. Is that discussion still alive?

Nigel Huddleston: I can't speak for other Departments, but we make assessments about global investment and international investment. Where it relates to sport, and football in particular, we are making moves there. It is also important to note that not every international investor is a bad person. We welcome international investment.



Q109 Damian Green: This is the point I am making. Are you being forced to be more moral than people in other industries?

Nigel Huddleston: In some ways, I would say that on a point of principle we should not be. However, we all recognise, as we are all constituency MPs, how important sport is to our local communities because of that emotional attachment and the history of the clubs. Whether there is a financial investment by a local community into a club or not, it does not matter. There is a strong emotional investment in the way that there is not in other parts of the economy. It is different, and I think, therefore, that questions about integrity are fair ones to raise.

Chair: We have to move on to our next question.

Q110 Dr Huq: Do the Government support further cultural boycotts in Russia?

Nigel Huddleston: We have gone beyond sport. The Secretary of State, Nadine Dorries, made a statement in the Commons last week, I think, relating to museums, arts and so on. We are also encouraging boycotts there, and there have been boycotts, in fact. Again, similar to sport, the arts and culture entities have, often of their own volition, made decisions to stop or restrict activities with Russia. We applaud them for doing so. They acted quite quickly.

Q111 Dr Huq: Yes, Eurovision, Netflix and all that lot have done so. Where would you draw the line with genuine people—people like academics? Where should the line be drawn about restricting access to Russian-related culture and sport? Do you ban Tchaikovsky?

Nigel Huddleston: There are several processes. There are obviously visa issues and so on. Again, the questions of who is coming in, for what purpose and what their background is are considerations. But you are right. Some things have been pushed a little bit too far—for example, not playing certain music because it is from a Russian composer. That is perhaps a bit too far. We cannot wipe out a history, culture and heritage that is not necessarily the fault of previous generations just because the current leadership is distasteful. I think there is a line to be drawn.

In terms of how it is done, the judgment of the cultural sector so far has generally been pretty good, because, of their own volition, they have often made the right decisions, saying, “We are not going to have this performance here,” and, “We are not going to allow these people to come in.” I think, broadly, those have been the right decisions. Depending on how long the sanctions last and how long the war in Ukraine continues, we will obviously always be considering further action, but so far, without the need for overt legislation, the cultural sector is broadly doing what we expect and require of them.

Q112 Dr Huq: Okay, so it would be on the individual in how far they went on the sanctions list?

Nigel Huddleston: You are raising a really important point. There is a personal individual responsibility here. There is a company responsibility, and there are also the entities themselves: the governing bodies and the



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cultural institutions. Broadly, I would say they deserve praise for recognising that they need to take a stand and have taken a stand, again, usually with the support of their customers or fan base, and done the right thing, which everybody can understand. I praise the sector for the work and the response.

- Q113 Dr Huq:** On the question of RT, as far as I understand, the satellite was switched off, so it was those pesky Europeans. It wasn't a unilateral decision of this country. If they found another way to broadcast in the UK—I guess people could get it now with VPNs, if they tried—would you explicitly want Russia Today banned?

Nigel Huddleston: The Secretary of State has written to those other platforms where there could potentially be routes in. You are right, though I wouldn't call our European friends pesky. They genuinely are my friends, at least. It was good, on an international basis, that the response to Russia Today has been fairly robust, and rightly so.

The Secretary of State did then write to other platforms, including a lot of the online operators, requesting that they also do everything they can to take down Russia Today. They have done so and, again, have broadly been proactive. YouTube and others have taken down content. Again, I think they have moved in the right direction. The Secretary of State has written to other operators requesting that they do exactly as you asked.

- Q114 Dr Huq:** Finally, do we think there will be Russian retaliation for all this? I think at an earlier stage, Liz Truss said something like, "If you do this, they'll take down the BBC, which is the voice of truth." Do we anticipate that there will be Russian retaliation?

Nigel Huddleston: Of course, we are trying to ensure that the BBC can still operate in as broad a range of places as possible, including in Russia. It is slightly outside my portfolio area, so I can't say too much, but on a point of principle, we want the voice of the BBC, and all independent journalism and honest reporting, to be out there and widely seen.

This is an opportunity to praise the journalist who yesterday very bravely made a stance in Russia. It sounds like she has been arrested and is probably going to be thrown into prison for taking such a stance. There are people, including journalists, who are acting in an incredibly brave manner. Unfortunately, we have heard that some journalists have been killed or injured already in this conflict. They play a vital role and are literally putting their lives at risk for doing so. We probably take for granted our independent media here. Events like that show that we never should.

Dr Huq: She has apparently been nominated for the Nobel peace prize.

- Q115 Kevin Brennan:** I will be very brief because I know your time is short, Minister. You confirmed to Clive Efford earlier that your position and that of the Government is to welcome the Saudi purchase of Newcastle United football club.

Leaving aside the issue of executions, that effectively means the purchase



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of one of our football clubs by a fund controlled by an individual whom our closest ally, the United States, has assessed as the person who ordered the murder and dismemberment of a brave journalist—such as you just talked about—Jamal Khashoggi, in one of its diplomatic posts in Turkey. Earlier you talked about what is morally defensible. How on earth can you morally defend welcoming—not just being indifferent to or saying nothing about—that investment?

Nigel Huddleston: As I've said before, and you've heard me say this, the decision on that was a decision for football.

Q116 **Kevin Brennan:** But you welcomed it, on the Floor of the House yesterday and—

Nigel Huddleston: Saudi investment and the bilateral relationship we have with Saudi is really important. There are many jobs in the UK dependent on that. Our relationship with Saudi is really important. I don't want to step on the toes of Foreign Office Ministers by stepping into overall foreign relations.

Q117 **Kevin Brennan:** Would you understand why some people might find your earlier words about brave journalists ring hollow, when just a few months earlier you welcomed the investment, which is controlled by the very individual who was responsible for the murder and dismemberment of a brave journalist?

Nigel Huddleston: I hope people wouldn't do that, because I hope they realise that I talk with sincerity on things like that. As I said, the relationship with Saudi is an important one. We also take the opportunity, because of the nature of our relationship, to talk frankly and openly with Saudi, at many levels, including ministerial. We are able to do so because of the nature of the relationship. Cutting off that relationship completely would mean that we can't express our views and opinions. When they are moving in the right direction we need to welcome and support them. That does not stop us from having very frank exchanges with Saudi.

Q118 **Kevin Brennan:** Can I finally ask you—this is one of my bugbears—when did the doctrine of ministerial collective responsibility get ditched in this Government? You have come before us today. You have even taken the trouble to write a letter to say you are not prepared to discuss the decisions taken by Government Ministers, by which you, under the ministerial code, are required to follow collective responsibility. Why on earth do you think it is acceptable for Ministers to come in front of a parliamentary Select Committee and say, "I can't talk about something because it's nothing to do with me, guv? It's some other Government Department that is responsible for that decision."

Nigel Huddleston: With respect, you have completely misinterpreted the letter. Of course we in government stand for collective ministerial responsibility. We have a debate, there is a Government line, and that is the decision. I therefore support all Government policy. As I have said, the sanctions, as implemented, I completely support.

Q119 **Kevin Brennan:** But you are not prepared to answer my question.



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Nigel Huddleston: I can't answer the details about the mechanics of, for example, what evidence there was to support X, Y and Z for a decision that I was not involved in.

Q120 **Kevin Brennan:** No one asked you that. You were asked quite general questions around sanctions, and you chose not to even explore those answers.

Nigel Huddleston: I think I have answered quite a few questions relating to sanctions today. As I said, I completely support the sanctions that have been imposed, but I do not know, and neither should I know, the details of the rationale behind why individual A may or may not have been sanctioned. Today we were starting to go down that route.

Kevin Brennan: I will leave it there, Chair.

Q121 **Chair:** Finally, to follow up on Kevin—I know you have to go—the question that many people really want answered is: are you prepared to see Chelsea go under as a result of this regime? Is it a price worth paying in order to keep a sanctions regime and aspects of it that means no away fans, staff potentially not being paid, and no merchandise? Are you willing to see Chelsea go under as a result?

Nigel Huddleston: Chairman, the actions we have taken and the licence we have given is precisely to stop that happening. We have enabled Chelsea to continue to operate and continue to play. Staff will continue to be paid and ticket sales will be honoured. It is important also to be clear that we are in discussions with Chelsea and the fans to look at ways we could enable further ticket sales, because we want to make sure the sanctions hit those we intend to hit and not others. That is the absolute opposite of what was implied.

Q122 **Chair:** So it is an entirely moveable feast. We could expect away fans and merchandise. You think those are possibilities.

Nigel Huddleston: We are looking at options, but it is also really important to understand that there will be consequences of sanctions. Roman Abramovich has links to Vladimir Putin, and let us not forget that this is in the context of an invasion of a sovereign territory where people are dying, and therefore there will be some inconvenience in the UK. We want to make sure the sanctions hit those we intend to be hit and to try and protect those we should not do harm to. I recognise there will be some inconvenience, but we are doing everything we can to make sure that Chelsea can operate. As I have said, we would welcome the sale, we would look at changing the licence to enable that sale, and that would be a very important and significant move for Chelsea.

Chair: Thank you for your time today, Minister. That concludes our second session. We will take a short adjournment before our third session.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Mark Bullingham and Helen MacNamara.

Q123 Chair: This is our third and final panel today. The first dealt with Russian disinformation, and the final two panels are dealing, effectively with Russian influence in sport—in fact, the influence of other countries as well, in terms of our national sport, football. We are joined in this panel by Mark Bullingham, the chief executive of the Football Association, and Helen MacNamara, the chief policy and corporate affairs officer of the Premier League.

I will just say, at the outset, that there has been some comment as to why it is that Mr Masters is not attending today. We have been in long discussions with Mr Masters. He has given a very reasonable and understandable excuse for not being here today. We appreciate you stepping in, Helen, but it is no reflection on Mr Masters at all, and we are very grateful for your attendance.

I will come to you first, Helen. Could you outline for us, please, from the Premier League's perspective, what would happen to the league if Chelsea was unable to find a buyer and could potentially be wound up?

Helen MacNamara: Obviously, this is an extraordinary, complex and unprecedented situation. First, it is pretty new to all of us. We have never been here before, and I am sure, in this session, we will go on to talk about why we do not want to be here again, either.

At the moment, as you know, the Government have issued an operating licence, which allows the club to function effectively until the end of the season on 31 May. We are working with the Government and Chelsea football club to try to ensure that that licence allows the club to continue as much as it can. The licence allows for the fixtures to go ahead. You have already talked this morning about away fans, and we are very keen, if we can, to resolve the situation, so that fans can continue to go and watch their club, whether that is Chelsea or away. We are working with Chelsea, so that we— It is an exceptional thing to be able to do, if someone's assets are frozen, but the Premier League is able to fund Chelsea the money that we owe it, so it can carry on paying people through this season.

We are really confident that a buyer can be found for Chelsea. We obviously need to work through the complexities, and the Government need to issue an operating licence so that the club can be sold. The club was already up for sale, so thankfully that process is quite mature. We are hopeful that a sale can be transacted and go through before that 31 May deadline.

It is absolutely true to say that, were that not to be the case—we are not confident—it is for the Government to decide whether they want issue a licence for the club to operate beyond 31 May. You can completely see that while there were grounds to allow that licence for this period time, it cannot be a thing infinitely while the club remains in Roman Abramovich's



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ownership. That situation has to be resolved. We have not really worked through the consequences should the club not be sold by 31 May and what that will mean.

We are confident that, within the season, the club can operate within the licence that the Government have provided. We are also confident that we are all working off the same objective, which is to try to make sure that Chelsea fans and other football fans in this country can carry on watching their game and are not too impacted by what has happened, but we recognise that this is an extraordinary situation. It is an extraordinary thing for the Government to have done, to provide for this licence.

You will also have seen this morning that the implications of EU sanctions and other sanctioning regimes may yet still cause further complications. We are trying to work through all that as it happens.

Q124 Chair: But you are saying that you have not yet worked through the consequences of Chelsea not finding a buyer and therefore, in effect, going bust. At the moment it is running at quite a substantial loss on a day-to-day basis. You have not yet thought beyond 31 May and what happens at the end of the season.

Helen MacNamara: As I am sure you will appreciate, what we are trying to do at the moment is put one foot in front of the other and try to manage the issues as they come across our desks. The first thing that matters is whether Chelsea is in a position to complete the season. The answer to that is categorically yes, under the licence that the Government have provided. That is our first objective. There is so much complexity in how the club will be sold, but we are confident that a buyer can be found for Chelsea. We want that to happen as soon as possible, to give certainty to everybody, and so we can go back to a slightly more normal arrangement, particularly for the Chelsea fans.

Q125 Chair: Thank you. There has been some discussion about Newcastle United and the takeover by the Saudi wealth fund. It has been reported that you received assurances that the state would not interfere in the running of Newcastle United. The Minister, rather surprisingly, was not aware of those assurances, and actually asked to see them. The Committee would like to know from you precisely what those assurances are. Could you outline them for us, please?

Helen MacNamara: I will go as far as I can. Some of these things, as you will expect, are subject to legal agreement between the club and the Premier League, but I will try to throw as much light on the situation as I can.

As the Minister said, and as we have said previously in public, the assurance we have is that, even though the PIF—the Saudi Arabian investment fund—owns a large shareholding in Newcastle, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia cannot exercise control over Newcastle United football club. Were it to happen that we saw evidence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia breaching those assurances, you can see in the Premier League rulebook that the Premier League board could take action against any dishonesty by



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owners or any practice that is not allowed under the rulebook. That is true of the particular assurances we have in this case, but it also true in general.

Q126 **Chair:** That is not a huge amount of detail, I have to say. How do you assess exactly whether or not the Saudi investment fund would be in breach of your honesty test?

Helen MacNamara: It would be whether we have had evidence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia attempting to control decision making in Newcastle United football club. That is the thing that would trigger that.

Q127 **Chair:** What would that look like? Would it be non-executive directors coming under their influence, or extra board members associated with the fund? How would that look to you?

Helen MacNamara: We have not pre-emptively prescribed what that might look like. We are confident that, because of the way we govern and work with our football clubs, and because we all operate together, were we to find any evidence of that sort of control, we would of course take action, but it is quite hard to speculate in advance about what that might look like.

Q128 **Chair:** This sounds like a scout's honour approach, rather than something that is in any way robust.

Helen MacNamara: I don't think that is a fair characterisation, because if we did see evidence, we would be able to act. One of the things that is—

Q129 **Chair:** Forgive me, but you have not specified precisely the limits and parameters of what would constitute the need to act. You also haven't specified what the evidence would be, so it does sound, dare I say it, very wishy-washy. It basically sounds as though you would consider taking action only if some very serious interference were exposed. It doesn't sound as though you have any real parameters for what would mean that you would look at the ownership structure at Newcastle United.

Helen MacNamara: I rather see it the other way around, if I may describe it like that, which is that the assurances are there and if there were any evidence of anything at all, that would trigger action.

Newcastle United is one of many organisations that the investment fund operates and owns parts of. Were it to become clear, for example, that the investment fund was unduly influenced by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, or we saw influence of that directly on Newcastle football club, we would absolutely take the action that we needed to.

Most significantly, we have those extra assurances alongside the things that are in the rulebook. Those were the reasons why, in the end, the Premier League board became comfortable with allowing the consortium through the owners and directors test as it stood.

Q130 **Chair:** Mr Bullingham, good afternoon and thank you for joining us. The FA is the traditional custodian of the game of football in this country. How

do you think that football can bring itself back from this calamity of allowing the sport to become a global centre for sportswashing?

Mark Bullingham: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about this important topic today. When you step back and look at a few items there, it is important to say that sport and politics have always been uncomfortable bedfellows, but they have always been linked. There are many positive moments in history when sport has delivered a lot of benefits through that. There also have been occasions when it is plain to see that countries have used sport to transform their reputations.

When we sit back and look at sport in our country, the key thing is to look at our foreign policy. The reality is that we have always encouraged inward investment, and the Premier League is a very visible example of that. But obviously, if we are using Russia as an example, there have been investments in our media, and we can use Saudi Arabia as an example of investments in our arms industry and so on. I think that philosophically, we have always been aligned with foreign policy to allow inward investment.

There was a subject covered by the fan-led review: whether football should have a higher test than other companies that could be invested in by external entities from abroad. The conclusion was that it shouldn't, although if there were a variety of tests in our country, it should conform to the highest possible standard. I think that some of the discussion this morning raises the question of whether that is right and whether there should be a further test on top of that, looking at the country specifically or through the owners and directors test.

Q131 **Chair:** You haven't particularly answered the question, in terms of how you think football recovers its reputation from this calamity.

Mark Bullingham: The point I was making was that football is an entity that has been invested in extensively from abroad, and there are a lot of good foreign owners in football. I think it is really a question as to how that continues moving forward, and what test gets applied. Should it be a higher moral test than that which is applied to every other industry or not?

Q132 **Chair:** Okay. The fan-led review has basically proposed something very financially based—in effect, if you can afford the football club. There will be financial due diligence, which I think we can all understand, having seen some of the chaotic outcomes of ownership in this country. Do you agree that there should be an extra integrity test tacked on to the financial test that has been proposed in the fan-led review?

Mark Bullingham: The owners and directors test, it is important to say, it is not something that we control as the FA. That is a source of frustration, as we would like to have more involvement in it. I think that there should be additional components to the test, as referred to by the Sports Minister earlier. The test has continued to evolve. When you talk specifically about integrity, you actually have to sit back and look at what is legally permissible. Objective tests are legally permissible, but my understanding is that subjective tests are absolutely not. I think it would come down to



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the drafting of the wording. I don't believe you could have a general integrity test, because that would lead to subjectivity and legal challenge.

- Q133 **Chair:** You asked whether football—or any sport, in fact—should be subject to higher standards than other businesses. Do you think they should: yes or no? Considering the importance it plays in our national life, and the fact that the branding element is so desirable, that perhaps undesirable elements will want to tie themselves to it.

Mark Bullingham: That is a really important discussion to have. If you look at the outcome you are trying to drive, the key in all this is that our community assets protected. One important thing that came out of the fan-led review is the definition of owners as custodians of the club. That has got to be the starting point, and then you work your test back from there effectively. You can never have a situation where a community asset is threatened.

- Q134 **Clive Efford:** Helen, on the agreement that you have with Newcastle United and the Saudi Arabian investment fund. The ultimate sanction is that you could force them to divest themselves of their share of Newcastle. Is that what you are saying to us?

Helen MacNamara: I am saying that all the sanctions that apply, and can apply, to any owner of any club, or any director of a club, are all set out in the Premier League rulebook, and they include disqualification. I appreciate, in the scheme of things, disqualifying Roman Abramovich after he was sanctioned looks relatively small fry, and I see that, but he was disqualified as a director. Similarly, the Premier League rulebook does allow for that or other sanctions to be put against a club if they don't comply with the rules and conditions that have been set out for them.

- Q135 **Clive Efford:** To take it back a step, if you hadn't signed up to that agreement, they couldn't have taken over Newcastle United football club.

Helen MacNamara: If we hadn't what, Mr Efford?

Clive Efford: You said there is an agreement in place that separates off the Saudi Arabian royal family from direct management involvement in Newcastle United football club. If you, as the Premier League, said, "We are not even going enter into that, because it is not policeable," effectively they could not have taken over Newcastle United football club.

Helen MacNamara: Part of the reason they got through are exactly that. The reason they got through the test is because they were able to offer assurances that there was a separation between the operation of the investment fund and the Government of Saudi Arabia.

- Q136 **Clive Efford:** But if you hadn't signed? That was something you could have chosen to do.

Helen MacNamara: If we hadn't signed—

Clive Efford: If you hadn't come to that agreement.



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Helen MacNamara: The bid came from a consortium that includes the investment fund. To speak in generalities, there are effectively two choices. Our rulebook sets what counts as control of a football club. That is why that particular test or case took so long, because there was litigation between the Premier League and Newcastle United football club, and potential bidders, around what control constituted.

The reason we were able in the end to reach a settlement and agreement was that the Premier League was satisfied that we had appropriate guarantees about control. What matters to us, for obvious reasons, is that we know who is actually in control of a football club that is operating in our league, and that that is something that they have given us as a guarantee.

Q137 Clive Efford: Okay, I won't pursue that any further. On the issue of the fit and proper person test for owners and directors, given the urgency of the situation with Chelsea, and how keen everyone is to see it put back on a stable footing, how do we guarantee that we don't jump out of the frying pan and into the fire, with another dodgy owner?

Helen MacNamara: I am very conscious of the time but, if it would help, I am happy to set out our position on the owners and directors test and the particular question you raised. It might be useful to loop back to what Mark was saying. It is absolutely right that the owners and directors test in the Premier League has been an evolving thing. There wasn't an owners and directors test in 2003 when Roman Abramovich bought Chelsea football club; that was brought in in 2005-06. Over time, it has been changed and adapted throughout the process.

One of the things I want to say to you today is that we do recognise some of the criticism of the owners and directors test. We recognise and accept that one of the many sensible and sound things that Tracey Crouch said in her fan-led review was about suggestions of how we could improve the owners and directors test. We already in the Premier League, before the fan-led review, had own review underway about how we could strengthen and improve our test. We paused that work while we were waiting for the Crouch review, to see what she recommended. Our plan is to take to our shareholders, at the end of this month and then at our AGM, a revised owners and directors test, and that is both what the test is and what the process should be.

That is notwithstanding that I completely recognise that there will be decisions made by other people about regulators and what we should be doing; but some of the things that we can do ourselves now, we are very keen to do now. So we are looking at how the gateway test can be strengthened. But there is also a very good point that was made and picked up by the recommendations in the fan-led review: have we got sufficient processes to make sure that there are ongoing checks? Every year, every owner has to fill in before the season a declaration to say that they still comply with our rules. We want to look at how we strengthen and deepen that more regular check. The other thing that the Premier League board want to do is that we already have an independent panel,



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chaired by a QC, who oversee our sanctioning regime, and we are in the process of putting together an independent panel that will support the Premier League board in scrutinising their decision making on the OADT.

I think that in an ideal world we would have liked to have made all these changes before now. In an ideal world, we would like to have particularly that independent panel in place before the board is asked to make another owners and directors test. I don't really know, in the timing of what will happen with the Chelsea decision, whether we will be able to achieve that or not, but we do see the case. This is one of the many places where we absolutely do recognise the case for change and the argument, and we are prepared to—again, this is not trying to pre-empt or avoid any regulation; it is just doing the things that we can do that are in our power now, and that is what we will be doing as soon as we can.

Q138 Clive Efford: Are you lobbying Government for regulation that would assist you in what you are seeking to achieve—to go beyond what is in the fan-led review?

Helen MacNamara: I think for now we think that we can implement pretty much all these measures in the fan-led review without—we don't need to wait for regulation and legislation.

Q139 Clive Efford: Yes, but what is in the fan-led review wouldn't stop Saudi Arabia and wouldn't stop Roman Abramovich.

Helen MacNamara: As Mark says, that is the debate that we have been having this morning—that football, over the years, has taken its lead from the policy of successive Governments about being open to—

Q140 Clive Efford: So we do need the Government to act.

Helen MacNamara: If the Government decided that sport should be held to a different standard, and that there should be regulations around which countries' investment could be allowed, or who should be allowed to invest in football clubs, then that is for the Government to decide. But for now we have always taken the approach that there should not be a separate bar or a separate test that applies to investment in football, as opposed to any other part of our country.

Q141 Clive Efford: Is it the Premier League's view that we should have an independent regulator of English football that is separate from the FA?

Helen MacNamara: We absolutely recognise the case for independent regulation in some parts. It is much more fun, I appreciate, to write up where we want to disagree on things, but we do see that there are places in football where you just have to look at what has happened over recent years or how fans feel, and we do see that there are places where there does need to be more independent regulation and more independent oversight. We absolutely think that the owners and directors test is one of those. We can see the case for some more independence on some aspects of financial control. We can absolutely see the case—again this goes to the fact that some of the more controversial things about football ownership aren't just where the money comes from but how owners behave and who



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the football clubs really belong to. So some of the plans that the FA have to strengthen their powers over what counts as a “golden share”, we are supportive of and we understand that. So that would be at the moment something that is in the gift of an individual club. We will strengthen our own Premier League rules to protect fan interests, and as I understand it, the FA will do that too.

Q142 Clive Efford: I didn’t quite hear you say that that should be independent of the FA.

Helen MacNamara: I think that we need to have more independent regulation in football. I think the FA is our regulator of football. It is not for the Premier League to decide what the answer is to where our independent regulation should be. It is wrong on every level for us to decide to design our own regulator. We are supportive of the FA; we think there is a natural reason why the FA would be an effective regulator. But we appreciate that it is not for us to argue one way or the other.

Q143 Clive Efford: Mark, should there be an independent regulator, independent of the FA? Haven’t you had your chance and blown it, really, as the FA?

Mark Bullingham: The fan-led review points out that whilst there are lots of good things in football, the area that isn’t working at all, or needs to be improved, is financial regulation; and particularly when you look down the pyramid, you cannot have a continued scenario where, for example, the championship is running at a £300 million loss, and we know the issues there. Tracey Crouch wrote that there were different scenarios that could be put forward, and one of those was that the regulator could sit within the FA. The reason she did that was because of all the other things we regulate.

I think that it is important to distinguish, however, if a regulator is to be created, that there are different models that could be brought forward. There could be a statutory regulator or it could be completely independent. There could be something set within the FA or something in the middle, which could be a co-regulator unit. For example, it would be a stand-alone, independent entity that would take the best bits, effectively, from regulation that is already enacted but would be independent, and the Government would have a say in who is appointed and so on.

So I don’t think that it is as simple as you make out, asking, “Should it be within the FA or not?” I would say that it is not an area of the game that we regulate at the moment. I think that we can look at how it combines with the areas that we do regulate, but anything that we did would be a whole new body that is independently housed within the FA and would require that independence. Equally, I think Tracey was very clear that, in order for us to take it on, governance changes would be required, and we are getting on with those governance changes now.

Q144 Clive Efford: My last question is about the financing of the football pyramid. Obviously the sanctions will have financial consequences for football, and that can be critical, because small changes in cash flow can



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be absolutely critical further down the pyramid. This question is for both witnesses, but I will start with you, Mark. What are we doing to ensure that the financial implications are not devastating for those lower down the football pyramid?

Mark Bullingham: In terms of sanctions specifically?

Clive Efford: Yes—the implications and knock-on effects of sanctions.

Mark Bullingham: If you look at us losing revenue from Russian broadcasting, for example, it is not one of our biggest broadcasters; it is actually relatively small, in the greater scheme of things. So I don't see a big knock-on effect down the pyramid from the Russian sanctions related to FA finances—

Q145 **Clive Efford:** Yes, but the money that comes out of the Premier League's broadcast deals is significant for clubs lower down, so are we being given a guarantee that those arrangements that are in place will not be touched? Is that what we are hearing?

Mark Bullingham: I was answering with regard to the impact on the FA's finances, which is really limited because the Russian broadcast deal that we have for the men's FA cup is not huge. I will let Helen answer on any implications for the Premier League.

Q146 **Clive Efford:** Over to you, Helen. Are you going to pull the ladder up?

Helen MacNamara: I am very happy to answer. There will be no knock-on consequences for any of the funding that we give to football outside the Premier League from the loss of the Russian broadcasting contract. That was the right thing to do and we will carry that ourselves.

Q147 **Chair:** Just to follow up on that, you said that there are many sensible things in the fan-led review, so can you confirm for this Committee that you have not lobbied at any level of Government against an independent regulator?

Helen MacNamara: Do you mean, has the Premier League lobbied against an independent regulator?

Chair: Yes—have you engaged in any form of lobbying with any Member of the Government, at any level, in order to prevent a new independent regulator?

Helen MacNamara: The Premier League position is that we absolutely recognise the case for some independent regulation—

Chair: That is not an answer to the question.

Helen MacNamara: If I could just finish, the thing that we don't agree with—Tracey Crouch knows this, and we have been very public about it—is full statutory regulation. Absolutely, the Premier League has made the case to the Government, and in public, that we don't think that full statutory regulation is the answer.

Q148 **Chair:** Just to be clear—this follows on from Clive's point—you definitely



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want the FA to continue its role, and you don't want a statutory independent regulator.

Helen MacNamara: We definitely don't want a statutory independent regulator. I can confirm that.

Q149 **Chair:** It wasn't as clear from your answers to Clive, actually, that that was thoroughly your position, so thank you for confirming that.

Mr Bullingham, there has been some breaking news—I always like doing this, because it reminds me of my days as a journalist, although I was never actually good enough to break any news. As you know, Chelsea cannot sell tickets for the away game at Middlesbrough and have asked that it be played behind closed doors due to "matters of sporting integrity". What is your reaction to that? Are they taking the mickey?

Mark Bullingham: I think what they are referring to—this issue has been raised by UEFA with regard to Chelsea games, and by other bodies—is the fact that normally a football match has both sets of fans, obviously, and their argument is that not having one set of fans has an impact on the sporting competition. When we step back and look at what the Government are trying to achieve with the sanctions on Mr Abramovich, it is clearly to put pressure on Mr Putin. I don't believe that the intention is to prevent Chelsea fans from going to games, or indeed to prevent away fans from going to Stamford Bridge. I also recognise that it is incredibly complicated to put a sanction in place at short notice. I think that that will all need working through. So, my answer is that I hope and expect that fans will be allowed to attend both Stamford Bridge and away games, but it is really important—

Q150 **Chair:** With respect, Mr Bullingham, this is about Middlesbrough. Chelsea are asking that Middlesbrough play their home game behind closed doors because they don't think it is fair on them. Surely you have to tell this Committee that that is absolute nonsense, and that they ought to get on and play the match in front of the fans who have paid good money in order to watch it.

Mark Bullingham: What I am trying to explain is that I think the end state will be something where the Government amend a licence to allow fans to go to games, and I think that that has not been possible in time for this weekend. What Chelsea are going to do is, effectively, appeal to the FA cup committee, and that will take a view on what should happen. My personal point of view is that I would expect the game to go ahead. I can't say more than that in a clear way, because it could prejudice any discussions that are going on at the moment. Effectively, they can claim and appeal.

Q151 **Chair:** So you think personally that the game should go ahead at Middlesbrough in front of Middlesbrough fans, rather than somehow allowing Chelsea to ask for it to be played behind closed doors, which I think would strike many people as both unfair and nonsensical.

Mark Bullingham: I can't give you an official FA position, because there will be an appeal—



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Chair: You are making a very good case at the moment for why you shouldn't be the regulator, Mr Bullingham, with the way in which you are dancing on the head of a pin.

Mark Bullingham: There are two processes.

Q152 **Steve Brine:** I can't believe the exchange you have just had, Chairman, to be honest. Didn't we have a situation during the pandemic—let's not get into whether it was necessary or not—where home fans were allowed to be in stadiums but away fans were not allowed to travel? There were no questions of sporting integrity; it was just the situation that we were in. It is not the fault of Middlesbrough fans that Chelsea have an owner who is allegedly close to a terrorist state, is it, Mark? What about the integrity of the FA cup, the oldest cup competition in the world? Can you show a little integrity on behalf of your own competition?

Mark Bullingham: My point was that there is a due process that will be followed and I am sure that they will get to the right conclusion today.

Q153 **Steve Brine:** But you can sort the due process right now: tell Chelsea to get their shin pads and boots on and play the damned game.

Mark Bullingham: There are proper processes and procedures that have to be followed. They are effectively instigating a process to challenge the arrangements. I am sure that we will get to the right place. I cannot give you a formal decision now, in the same way as you would not be able to give a decision on, for the sake of argument, a court proceeding, because it needs to go through the proper process. I have been quite clear on where I think it will end up, but I cannot say more because it would prejudice the outcome of that proceeding.

Q154 **Steve Brine:** Well, sports journalists will be writing as we speak. How have the FA engaged with FIFA and UEFA in the last few weeks and on imposing sanctions in football? How have those conversations gone?

Mark Bullingham: Very soon after the invasion of Ukraine, we spoke to UEFA and FIFA extensively and made our position very, very clear. As you would imagine, we also spoke with Government extensively, and we spoke with lots of other federations. I believe it was on a Sunday that we came out very clearly, saying that we would not play against Russia in any tournament, in any football match, when we had some upcoming games in March. Quite soon after that—I believe it was the following day—both FIFA and UEFA came out and said that they were suspended from all competitions as well. We continue that dialogue, and FIFA and UEFA are in no doubt as to our position, and I would say that there is very good alignment across all of the UEFA countries that I have spoken to.

Q155 **Steve Brine:** Should these sanctions regimes in sport be driven by what the fans want? This is not going to go away anytime quickly, is it? There are other countries—Belarus, for instance—that could be drawn in. Should there be a strict code of rules that is drafted up by the governing bodies, or should it be case by case and based on what the fans want?



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Mark Bullingham: I think it is case by case and more than fan view, although obviously that will always be taken into account. What is critical here is foreign policy. We all believe that what we have seen in the last few weeks is truly exceptional and we hope to never see it again. I think we reacted quickly. We were very well aware of the Government position and felt that we had the opportunity to help, and to help effectively isolate Vladimir Putin. That is why we acted as we did. I think these are completely exceptional circumstances.

Q156 **Steve Brine:** Have you spoken to the England manager about the current situation?

Mark Bullingham: I have, yes.

Q157 **Steve Brine:** What is his view?

Mark Bullingham: He was very supportive of the action that we took on Sunday.

Q158 **Dr Huq:** On 3 March, the Premier League announced that it is considering introducing a human rights element to the fit and proper persons test. How would that apply? Would it work retrospectively? We know that the Gazprom Arena is not going to host the Champions League, but we have the Emirates Stadium, and there was a Sports Direct stadium until recently.

Helen MacNamara: Unfortunately, we did not announce it; it was briefed out by some of the people who we had been talking to.

Q159 **Dr Huq:** So it was leaked.

Helen MacNamara: Yes—

Q160 **Dr Huq:** Was that turning on the tap? You know how these leaks often work.

Helen MacNamara: I have no idea how those stories entered the papers. It is completely true that we have been speaking to Amnesty and other organisations, as part of this review of the OADT, about what would be an appropriate test and how we would exercise it. When you get into the detail—it goes to the point Mark was making about subjectivity and objectivity—whose judgment would the Premier League board be relying on, and how would the process work, if we wanted to put an element of a human rights test into the process? We have had some really great support and help from Amnesty and other partners as we have been having these conversations. We are in the middle of just trying to define and decide what that might look like.

I am sorry not to be able to give you full details of where we have ended up. As I have said, these are subjects for debate for our shareholders in the next few weeks and months, but then we should be able to say what changes we have made and what elements we have been thinking about. We have been talking to Amnesty in particular about what we can do to ensure that we are aligned with international best practice. You will have seen that FIFA and the IOC have incorporated some human rights tests



into some of their policies and procedures in recent years, and we have been talking to the people who helped to design that.

Q161 Dr Huq: What would the global view be on such an element? We know that the World cup is going to Doha. Qatar has an appalling human rights record, with people from south Asia—those sorts of countries—building the stadiums. Are human rights an issue for your organisation, Mark?

Mark Bullingham: Yes, of course human rights are an issue for our organisation. I think Qatar is very much on the radar for us—the World cup starts in November. Our approach to Qatar is stepping back and looking at what we can and cannot control. Starting from the point that we have a World cup in Qatar, we wanted to get out there and understand the situation there. We have had several visits out there to meet migrant workers. We have met the NGOs on the ground—the International Labour Organisation, the BWI and so on—to really understand where the country has made progress and where there are still significant gaps in the implementation of human rights legislation. We are working through that. We have a meeting with our men's players next week to talk them through that and understand how we will respond accordingly.

One thing I would say, though, is that all of the migrant workers that we have met, and all the NGOs that we have met on the ground, have been really clear that they want the World cup to go ahead in Qatar and that, by having regular visits there—that has almost been the No. 1 ask of us—we are helping to shine a light on the country and drive positive change. Their perspective is to keep coming and keep shining that spotlight.

Q162 Dr Huq: Some of the reports about the sort of neo slavery-type conditions they are kept in have been horrendous. I think labour law there is non-existent; trade unions do not feature. I think you alluded to this with Russia losing contracts, but what implications will sanctions have for broadcasting deals?

Helen MacNamara: We did not take the decision to pull the broadcast feed from Russia because of the sanctions; it was more in response to the situation, and to do what other sports have done by showing our solidarity with people in Ukraine and send any message that we can to the Putin Government about how we all feel about what is happening. If there are further sanctions, we will comply totally and fully, and deal with the consequences. To reassure Mr Efford, definitely, from a Premier League perspective, we would not be passing any further costs for anything else that will happen to our support for the rest of football. Does that answer your question, Dr Huq?

Q163 Dr Huq: I suppose, yes. Will the hole in the budget affect things for the average punter from Russia?

Helen MacNamara: We have made the decision to stop broadcasting. We have a contract that we are planning to roll out for the next season. I am sure that we would all like to be in a position where it is possible to start broadcasting into Russia next season because things have changed so much, but we are realistic about that probably not being the case. Our



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shareholders will have to make a decision about precisely what they do about that contract, as well as what we do in the future, but for now, we have made the decision to no longer broadcast into Russia.

Q164 Dr Huq: Lastly, in a normal situation where we do not have bloodshed and a horrible war going on, how far do ethics drive the sale of your rights to broadcast this?

Helen MacNamara: We have always taken the approach in the Premier League of trying to make sure that as many people in the world are watching our football. The Premier League is a soft power superpower in the sense that our games are shown in—I will get the numbers the wrong way round, but it is something like—800 million households, and 3.2 billion people watch the Premier League.

Obviously, that is a fantastic thing for our country, and people watch it because they love the football on the pitch and they love the sport, but I also feel quite strongly that it projects our values into all those countries. Everybody who watches our games sees the Rainbow Laces campaigns every year. They see the No Room for Racism campaign—we did that last weekend.

In every single game everywhere in the world, people are seeing our players, because they are free to make that choice, take a knee before every game. Some of that is sending a strong message about our values. It is not just about the brilliance and fantasticness of the sport, which you would expect me to be very positive about.

We are confident that the Premier League sends brilliant messages about our country all around the world, and we want to be able to carry on doing that. You may have seen that when we did a big show of support for Ukraine a couple of weeks ago, our Chinese broadcasters decided not to broadcast that that weekend. Obviously, we are not aiming for that, but equally we are not going to shy away from doing the right thing because it might have an impact like that in the future.

Q165 Kevin Brennan: Just as a matter of interest, how much was the Russian broadcast deal worth?

Helen MacNamara: I know the number for our new one, which was going to be £40 million over six years.

Kevin Brennan: The old one would have been below that figure, presumably.

Helen MacNamara: Yes. We are obviously just at the end of the last year.

Q166 Kevin Brennan: Is it likely to be half of that?

Helen MacNamara: Even less than that.

Q167 Kevin Brennan: In answer to Mr Efford, it would not have much of an impact anyway on the Premier League's finances overall. Is that fair to

say?

Helen MacNamara: I think that is fair to say. It is not without consequence or without pain, but it is definitely not a major part of our broadcast revenue, that is right to say.

Q168 **Kevin Brennan:** Mr Bullingham, on the issue that the Chair raised about the FA cup tie between Chelsea and Middlesbrough, did you say that the committee is meeting as we speak or later on to discuss their response to Chelsea's request to play the game behind closed doors?

Mark Bullingham: I only heard about this literally as I was coming into the meeting. I know they were scrambling to get the committee together to give a quick response, so unfortunately, I do not have that information for you. I know they will try to expedite it as quickly as possible.

Q169 **Kevin Brennan:** You are not part of that committee, but it might be meeting as we speak. If you do have a chance to talk to them before the committee meets, and on the issue of fairness and sporting integrity, it might be worth pointing out to them that, even though there will be 11 players on each side of the pitch—it will be fair in that sense, even if Chelsea fans are not there—Chelsea's overall player wage bill is £333 million and Middlesbrough's player wage bill is £13 million, which is £3.9 million less than Romelu Lukaku's annual remuneration of £16.9 million. Therefore, the committee might want to take that into account about how people would feel about Chelsea's protestation that it is being treated desperately unfairly in the situation. Would you be able to pass that message on to them if the committee has not yet met by the end of our session?

Mark Bullingham: I certainly can.

Q170 **Kevin Brennan:** I am very grateful for that; thank you very much. In relation to the Premier League, which nations are the biggest investors in football in this country and in the Premier League?

Helen MacNamara: Do you mean in terms of broadcast contracts or in terms of owners?

Kevin Brennan: I mean in terms of owners.

Helen MacNamara: It is quite hard to be completely precise about this, but if we take our ownership group—all the people who own more than a 30% share in one of our clubs. Obviously it is not totally equal because sometimes one person owns one club and sometimes it is a consortium of people. I would say that about one third of the ownership is owners from England and Wales, a further third is made up of people from the US, and then there is a range of other countries represented.

The reason I am a bit hesitant is related to the point Mr Green made earlier: you can get quite reductive in the conversation about where individuals come from, and there is a lot more to judge around ownership, but I hope that gives you an impression, broadly speaking, of where—and



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that is just on people, not on amount of money. I do not have the amount of money numbers in front of me.

Q171 Kevin Brennan: Am I right in thinking that in the case of Newcastle, the consortium you talk about is 80% controlled by the Saudis?

Helen MacNamara: It is, yes. I will correct that if I am not right.

Kevin Brennan: That is the figure I have heard. If it is incorrect, please let the Committee know.

Helen MacNamara: From our ownership perspective, it is people who own more than 30% that we would class as being owners.

Q172 Kevin Brennan: Do you think there is a shortage of ethical owners in football in this country?

Helen MacNamara: I think this is a very hard conversation to have on a day like today, when we are all here because of what has happened in Russia and Roman Abramovich, and one owner. If you talk to football fans from Leicester, or you see the investment that Man City has made in communities and schools locally, or Watford, or the extraordinary investment that owners put into not just the pitch but the communities they work in—I know the Premier League more, obviously, but I know that ownership right through football is full of people who are desperately committed to their club and their community, and trying to do the right thing. It is important to make the case for all those owners who might not be grabbing so many headlines but are not just supporting the game, but supporting the communities where the clubs are based. There is a lot of that.

Q173 Kevin Brennan: Clearly, there will be a variety of motives for why people would invest in football—probably usually not to actually set up a profitable enterprise, although some of them are, obviously. Is it not the case that football, let us be clear about it, has been convenient for many people who acquired vast fortunes, often in kleptocratic states and in dodgy ways by being extremely friendly and helpful to despots and dictators, and therefore received lucrative assets as a result, that they then wanted to wash through the British football system? Isn't it the case that the Premier League has been a vehicle for doing that?

Helen MacNamara: I don't think that is a fair characterisation—

Q174 Kevin Brennan: Isn't that what happened in the case of Roman Abramovich?

Helen MacNamara: I don't think that is a fair characterisation of owners in the Premier League in general. I would—

Kevin Brennan: Is it of some, though?

Helen MacNamara: I don't think it is a fair characterisation of owners that we have in the Premier League at the moment—

Q175 Kevin Brennan: Apart from Roman Abramovich.



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Helen MacNamara: Roman Abramovich has been disqualified from being a director of a football club and will no longer be an owner.

Kevin Brennan: But he is still an owner at the moment—

Helen MacNamara: He is, because he owns the asset, but—

Q176 **Kevin Brennan:** So he's a complete outlier and the rest of football is pretty clean?

Helen MacNamara: I would be very surprised to discover that there are more people like Roman Abramovich who own our football clubs, yes.

Q177 **Kevin Brennan:** On the issue of the independent regulator—you were clear about the Premier League's position on it—wouldn't it be much better if the independent regulator were on a statutory footing and they could take a lot of this? You would not have to come before us to answer questions—imagine that. They could take a lot of this stuff off your hands. They could decide on the basis of regulations set down by the democratically elected Government as to whether somebody is a fit and proper owner of a football club in this country. Why don't you just welcome that hugely? Then you could get on with what I am sure really motivates you—a love of football and a wish to see a brilliant and successful Premier League.

Helen MacNamara: The last bit is definitely true, and I am pretty sure that the Committee will be calling the Premier League to ask other questions in the future. I am sure a statutory regulator would not be a reason for the Premier League not to come before you in the future.

We agree with a lot of what Tracey Crouch has recommended. In particular, you would have to look at football in the last couple of years, and the experience of fans and fan power, be it the reaction to the European super league or, perhaps more profoundly for the whole of football, the experience of having to play football behind closed doors, and just what a transformational difference that made to everybody. We talk a lot in football about our brilliant game on the pitch, and the fantastic quality of the coaching, the managerial and all those things, but it really showed, more than anything else, that we had not focused enough on or talked enough about the fact that the magic that makes those billions of people want to watch football is because of the fans in the ground. It is good to see that fans are now going to be taken more seriously.

We in football are going to get on with all sorts of recommendations in the fan-led review—even pending a regulator that may or may not come, which is not our choice. That is what the Minister said: football should get on with whatever football should get on with. We are doing that. We will be making changes to how we work with fans—we will create a new fan standard in the Premier League so that all our clubs have to meet a bare minimum in terms of how they engage with fans. We are taking a lot of the really good and thoughtful ideas in that review and getting on and doing them. If I may, slightly cheekily, if you do not have a statutory

basis, you can change really quickly, so one of the things we are doing is trying to change what we can change really quickly.

Kevin Brennan: Okay. I will say, cheekily, that all I want is for Wales to qualify for the World cup, and I will leave it there.

Steve Brine: Good luck with that.

Q178 **Chair:** Just to follow up on that point, you have waxed lyrical about the Crouch review and its many good points, but you do not support a statutory regulator. Do you support the transfer levy?

Helen MacNamara: There is a transfer levy at the moment, and one of the things it funds is—

Q179 **Chair:** I know there is one at the moment. Do you support her proposal of—

Helen MacNamara: We are very happy to come back—although nobody else will thank me for this—to talk more fully about this at a later point. If we distil it down to the things that we are concerned about, there is a whole set of proposals. We in the Premier League need to have a look at what the aggregate impact of that is—particularly how much money it takes out of the Premier League. I know that it is very easy to say, “Well, you can just keep on adding to the bill and take more and more investment out of the league,” but that has direct consequences.

To pick up Mr Brennan’s point, the Premier League is not full of profitable clubs. The investment that is brought into football is spent mainly on the pitch. We absolutely recognise that there should be greater cost control; we have made huge progress in this last year on accepting that there needs to be cost control, both in our league and for the EFL, and we think that with cost control, we might be able to get more profitable and sustainable clubs.

In the short term, though, we have to be really mindful of the long list of things that are in the Crouch review that would take out a significant amount of value from the Premier League as it is now. That value has impact and consequence. I have talked very proudly today, and we often talk very proudly, about how the Premier League is an economic powerhouse as well. We are very internationally competitive, and there are other organisations outside the UK that would definitely like to see a Premier League, and Premier League clubs, that had less money to spend on the pitch.

What we would like to be able to do—I hope we can work with the Government to do this—is make sure that the economic and financial consequences of some of those recommendations are worked through, so that you can implement the spirit of what we are trying to achieve without necessarily causing the economic harm.

Q180 **Chair:** There is nothing that actually costs you anything or leads to independent regulation. Some £5 million to £10 million is what Tracey



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Crouch asks for, funded by a percentage of the gains from broadcast revenue. She states: "This is not an à la carte menu...This is a holistic package that provides a long-term sustainable future and one that protects English football." You are trying to make it an à la carte package, are you not?

Helen MacNamara: No, I am just assuming that we are going to do the thing that we normally do—

Q181 **Chair:** You are effectively suggesting that you wish for certain parts of the fan-led review to fall away, and that you would retain other parts of it, so are you not, by definition, trying to take an à la carte approach?

Helen MacNamara: If it is put like that, then yes, of course; but I think that is what normally happens after a report like this is published: there is a whole load of analysis that needs to be done about the impact and implications. We have done that, alongside everybody else, and there are some aspects of the way in which the proposals are set out in the report that we think would do harm to the Premier League and to our clubs. It is our job to point them out.

If the Government decide that they still want to go ahead, then of course, it absolutely not for the Premier League to decide and design how we should be regulated, but we do think it is our responsibility to point out where some of the proposals would, if they were implemented entirely purely in the way they were described in that report in November—with no nuance and no flexibility—lead to economic harm for our league. It is our job to point that out.

Q182 **Chair:** Okay. Simon Jordan said on Roman Abramovich that he had been very good for Chelsea in terms of the trophy cabinet—I think they have been the most successful club in terms of trophies since Mr Abramovich took control—but that it is one of the worst things to happen to English football because of hyperinflation and player wages. You have said yourself that most of the money you raise goes on to the pitch. Do you agree with that analysis?

Helen MacNamara: I absolutely agree that we need to do something about costs in football to try to make it sustainable, ensuring in particular that it is possible to carry on the fantastic thing we have of having had 50 clubs in the Premier League over time through promotion and relegation, and it is really important that it is possible for any club to make it to the top. The only way we are going to be able to do that is if we do something about some kind of cost control that applies to—

Q183 **Chair:** That's great, but you have avoided the main question, which was very simple. Roman Abramovich: good or bad for football? Discuss. Yes or no?

Helen MacNamara: Nobody looking at this situation today, and seeing what has happened to the Chelsea fans, can say that having Roman Abramovich has been a good thing given what is now happening.

Q184 **Chair:** Okay, so in hindsight, it was a bad thing, but for the previous 20



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years, it was a good thing. Is that right?

Helen MacNamara: I don't think I would be as binary as that, Chair. What I am saying to you is that nobody can look at today's situation and say that this is a thing that we would ever want to happen again, particularly for the Chelsea fans.

Chair: Okay, thank you. That concludes our session. Mr Bullingham, I know that you are a little unwell today, so thank you very much for joining us and reminding us of what a great way to do a Committee Zoom is—I am being sarcastic, by the way. Helen MacNamara, thank you again for your evidence.