



# PROCEEDINGS OF THE GIBRALTAR PARLIAMENT

**AFTERNOON SESSION: 3 p.m. – 6.45 p.m.**

**Gibraltar, Wednesday, 3rd July 2024**

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# The Gibraltar Parliament

*The Parliament met at 3 p.m.*

[MADAM SPEAKER: Hon. Judge K Ramage GMH *in the Chair*]

[CLERK TO THE PARLIAMENT: J B Reyes Esq *in attendance*]

## **The Appropriation Act 2024 – Second Reading – Debate continued**

**Madam Speaker:** The Hon. C P Santos.

**Minister for Equality, Employment, Culture and Tourism (Hon. C P Santos):** Madam Speaker,  
5 as Minister for Equality, Employment, Culture, Tourism, as well as Training and Youth, I address  
you today with a deep sense of purpose and a deep sense of commitment. Through the prism of  
the array of portfolios under my care, I am reminded daily of how our society is interconnected  
and of the boundless potential that lies within each of us.

10 In this Chamber, where we are entrusted to make decisions that will affect the lives of all those  
that call Gibraltar their home, we have the unique privilege, responsibility and opportunity to  
shape the course of our collective future as a people.

Today, as we gather to discuss the allocation of resources and the priorities of our Government,  
we do so with a singular focus: to build a society where every individual, regardless of background  
or circumstance, can both thrive and contribute meaningfully.

15 I can say this because our Government has done just that for people exactly like me. I am a  
product of the GSLP's commitment back in 1988, to ensure everyone had the opportunity to study,  
train and work and become more than we could ever have aspired to be.

20 I was enabled to continue my education in the arts, a career choice not stereotypical for  
Parliament, although I recognise I walk in the shoes of great thespian politicians, like Labour  
Member of Parliament the late Glenda Jackson MP, an Oscar winner, and of course my colleague  
the Hon. John Cortes, a Drama Festival winner too. *(Laughter)*

Yet today I stand before you, Madam Speaker, alongside my esteemed colleagues, all from  
different backgrounds and socio-economic circumstances.

25 I am the living embodiment of the result and success of the GSLP's commitment to its people,  
and for the information of the Hon. Leader of the Opposition, much more than just the creator of  
Rock Masters as well as many other beloved characters that played to sold out audiences at local  
theatres.

30 The responsibilities encompassed within my portfolio – equality, employment, culture,  
tourism, training and youth – reflect the multifaceted nature of our society. They remind us that  
our vision of progress must be comprehensive, inclusive and forward thinking.

I am fortunate indeed to have a portfolio that I *truly* believe in, I can identify with and which  
I will work my hardest to grow and develop.

35 In this, my first annual budget address today, you will find a statement of our values and  
priorities as a Government. A statement of our blueprint for a society where diversity is  
celebrated, where opportunity is accessible to all and where the aspirations of our youth are  
nurtured and realised.

We aim to forge a path towards a future where equality is not just a goal, but a lived reality; where employment is not just a means of livelihood, but a source of dignity and fulfilment; where culture is not just a reflection of our past, but a source of inspiration for our shared future; where  
40 tourism is not just an economic opportunity, but a bridge that connects us to the world; where training is not just an investment, but a pathway to empowerment; and where the youth are not just the leaders of tomorrow, but the agents of change today.

Those are our articles of faith in these areas of my ministerial responsibility.

Madam Speaker, I trust that what I have said to preface my address has laid out clearly the  
45 context for everything else that follows. I will open with the Ministry of Equality. This Department focuses on promoting and safeguarding equality and human rights. We deal with all the protected characteristics, the personal traits that we will not allow as reasons to discriminate against anyone in our society.

We have worked on all areas since April 2023, from Disability to Gender Equality with ongoing  
50 projects and the creation of new initiatives.

Madam Speaker, I am very proud to be the Minister for Equality and to follow in the footsteps of the Hon. Samantha Sacramento who was the first ever Minister for Equality in the first ever Ministry of Equality in Gibraltar. This was a portfolio which was established by the Chief Minister for the first time after the election of the GSLP Liberals in 2011. Samantha held this position for  
55 12 years and I had the pleasure of working on projects with her during that time, even before I joined Cabinet.

Ms Sacramento is a close personal friend who I have known since childhood and I would like to take this opportunity to credit and thank her for the dynamism, her fortitude and integrity, and for her tenacity which enabled her to change the equality landscape in Gibraltar. (*Banging on  
60 desks*)

During her extensive and very successful tenure, and given her passion, energy and commitment, the Hon Samantha Sacramento ensured that the Ministry of Equality was pioneering in its vision, ethos, policies and of course most importantly on legislation. Landmark legislative changes such as the Surrogacy Act in 2021 regulated surrogacy arrangements and established  
65 legal parenthood in cases of assisted reproduction arrangements.

The Civil Partnership Bill in 2014 enabled the formal recognition of relationships between couples of the same sex. This was followed by the Civil Marriage (Amendment) Act in 2016 which allowed for the civil marriage of same sex couples, something I am currently enjoying the fruits of today – and what a wedding it was!

These are all examples of the ground-breaking work effected by the former Minister and the  
70 team at the Ministry of Equality. The work she undertook for persons with disabilities in launching the RADAR Key Scheme and the introduction of the Disability Information Card has made the lives of countless people in Gibraltar that much better.

Equality is important to me personally. As an openly gay man it has been heartbreaking to sit  
75 and watch Parliament and listen to some Members of the Opposition express their negative opinions about the legislative rights of the LGBTQ+ community, especially in regard to equal marriage. As we cannot forget that LGBTQ+ rights are Human Rights.

I am sure that this feeling I had was shared by women when the discussion came up about their reproductive rights. That is why I proudly stand with my party, a party that upholds and enforces  
80 policies of respect, equality and choice. I, as well as many others in our community can now live our truest lives safely and honestly due to the legislative changes this Government has made which enable and protect us.

Progressive at the time, divisive even in showing how different we are from Members opposite, but always inclusive. (*Banging on desks*)

Madam Speaker, for the benefit of our new Members I wanted to recap on the work  
85 Ms Sacramento did. I have just touched upon a few of her achievements, but I could mention so many more. I can honestly say it is a privilege to pick up the mantle and continue to develop her work.

I pledge to work in the same indefatigable fashion and to build upon her legacy for the good of  
90 *all* of our citizens. It is imperative to raise awareness of equality.

During the first six months of the financial year, my predecessor successfully worked on the extension of its training provision on equality matters for Government Departments and across the public sector.

In April 2023 the then Ministry of Equality was invited to participate in the Department of  
95 Education's In-Service days for all education staff.

Three training workshops on 'Unconscious Bias and Challenging Stereotypes in the Classroom' were delivered and were attended by a total of 60 participants including teachers, special needs learning support assistants, and students completing their Postgraduate Certificate of Education at the University of Gibraltar.

100 These sessions, Madam Speaker, are important in embedding our core values of social justice and fairness amongst the younger members of our community. The importance of challenging stereotypes, particularly gender stereotypes, is central to the work at the Ministry of Equality. This often goes hand in hand with initiatives which address the under-representation of women in male-dominated fields, such as in firefighting.

105 A live virtual presentation was given to Notre Dame Lower Primary School by the Antarctic Fire Angels, an all-female team of firefighters. Initiatives such as these give children the message that they can choose any and all careers and are not limited on grounds of gender. My Ministry looks forward to further collaborations with our colleagues in Education on similar projects.

Gender Equality is also big on my agenda and in June 2023 we saw the 4th Women's  
110 Mentorship Programme, one of the key initiatives in our equality strategy. Maximising the talents and skills of both women and men in equal measure is an objective that we can all back and more importantly that we can *all* benefit from.

It has been comprehensively established that a more gender-balanced workforce is the key  
115 ingredient for success for organisations, businesses and for national economies. Later on, I will expand on the value of a diverse workforce and its impact on business and society.

The 5th cycle of the programme commenced in February 2024 with a cohort of 27 mentees, bringing the total number of mentees since the inception of the programme to 131.

120 Feedback is hugely positive and this year we have extended the one-to-one sessions to group sessions. This programme offers a fantastic opportunity for personal and professional growth and development and well-being.

I will continue to urge anyone interested in participating to contact my team.

And, Madam Speaker, if I may be so bold, perhaps you may consider joining us as a mentor next year! I will, of course, pass the information and the invitation to you more formally.

125 To further highlight and bring awareness to the historic under representation of women in Gibraltar, the Hon. Samantha Sacramento initiated the publication of '*Women of Gibraltar, Forgotten Narratives*'. My thanks to Claire Montado, CEO of the Gibraltar Heritage Trust, for this project which redresses the imbalance of the roles and achievements of women in so many spheres. The book has been enthusiastically received and is telling of our appetite for and interest in gender equality matters. It is beautifully written and an inspiration to all.

130 Our mission in the Ministry is to address issues that affect women *and* men, and as such International Men's Day is used to highlight the issues that can disproportionately affect men in comparison to their female counterparts.

135 Our focus this year was on promoting mental health. Globally, the suicide rates for men are much higher than for women. We invited the Department of Public Health and the GHA's Mental Health Services, local charities and NGOs that work in supporting mental health and well-being to the piazza to showcase their services to the public.

The Gibraltar Mental Welfare Society, GibSams, Childline, Clubhouse, Walking Together, Cye-Cyl, Prostate Cancer Support Group Gibraltar and the Citizens Advice Bureau all came on board to help us in our mission. My thanks to all of them for joining us. A discussion panel 'A Call to Men'  
140 was held to break the stigma around men's mental health and well-being.

It focused on the importance of eradicating barriers that may prevent boys and men seeking help, advice and support. Panellists were invited to speak frankly and openly about their personal experiences with mental health challenges, which has contributed positively to the momentum around mental health awareness and de-stigmatisation. I look forward to marking International Men's Day again later this year with further positive and constructive offerings.

Madam Speaker, on the flipside to Men's International Day we also marked International Women's Day. We worked with the Gibraltar Academy of Music and Performing Arts to create two events: 'Inspire Inclusion' a fireside chat event in collaboration with the Gibraltar Garrison Library, and 'La Maleta' an interactive performance.

The first attracted a full audience and generated vibrant and lively discussion during the Q&A section. The later sold out the three performances on offer which paid tribute to the generation of women who lived through the evacuation in Gibraltar. It was a very moving and sensitive piece.

And I would like to thank GAMPA, the Garrison Library, the Press Office and my team for their sterling efforts to mark International Women's Day.

To continue raising awareness of Equality issues, my Ministry is currently delivering training to several stakeholders through the Personnel and Development Department. This is open to all civil servants to homogenise and embed the understanding of Equality matters across the service. This past May, we delivered training workshops to the Gibraltar Football Association on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion to include unconscious biases and ways to mitigate these.

This is the first time that Equality training has been delivered to a non-governmental department, agency or authority, and I am encouraged to say it was very well received. These considerations are imperative for modern and forward-looking organisations. I am pleased we were able to support the GFA in this way.

To further make our society more equitable my Ministry continues to work on shared Parental Leave. This new and bespoke system of parental leave will give parents more choice and flexibility particularly in how they care for their child in the first year.

There are a number of wide-ranging social and financial implications involved which require a close scrutiny and revision, and a number of legislative changes which will warrant careful consideration and measured deliberation. We are in consultation with stakeholders in both the public and private sectors to include the GFSB, the Chamber of Commerce and Unite the Union, to consider the options available.

The Gender Gap on pay is another area my Ministry is working on. The Gender Pay Gap Survey is still being analysed and the results are expected to be announced imminently. We are also looking at securing more recent data to be able to understand how far we have come on gender equality and to identify what remains to be done. This project was commenced prior to my coming into office.

As you can imagine this has been a very involved issue but one which I am highly committed to bring to fruition sooner rather than later.

Madam Speaker, as I highlighted in the introduction of my Equality portfolio, the Ministry of Equality has made huge strides to ensure that LGBTQ+ rights are properly protected by legislation. These legislative changes are always accompanied, understood and embraced by awareness campaigns and community engagement.

Legislative changes mark and often initiate a cultural shift and changes in attitude. And I am very happy and grateful to say, Madam Speaker, that the Gibraltar of 2024 is a much more inclusive place than the Gibraltar for pre-2011.

Notwithstanding, and whilst this Government has ensured that legislation protects members of the LGBTQ+ community, we continue and will continue to mark Pride Month because there is no place in our community for homophobia, biphobia or transphobia. I would like to thank the LGBTQ+ Committee who lead on Pride Day and the parade. I am proud to continue collaborating with them on this and other projects throughout the year to create awareness and continue effecting change.

195 This year we have marked Pride with a panel event discussion to raise awareness of and to generate a positive conversation around LGBTQ+ issues. The importance of having LGBTQ+ allies was also a very important part of this discussion and calling out behaviour and language that is inappropriate, offensive, distressing or humiliating is an important factor in creating a mindful and respectful society for all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

We mark Pride, Madam Speaker, in ways that are strikingly visual as awareness is fundamental. We do this in several ways: by illuminating the Moorish Castle in rainbow colours; by flying the Rainbow Flag in prominent places throughout Gibraltar; and by supporting the Pride parade.

200 These are simple but powerful reminders to everyone that in an equitable and inclusive Gibraltar we are all of equal value and worth and that we are all entitled to and deserving of full respect at *all* times. There is no space in Gibraltar for hate and everyone has the right to lead true and authentic lives free from the fear of hostile or violent reactions from those around them.

205 Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Equality works closely with organisations that provide specialist and valuable services, one of which is the Citizens Advice Bureau. CAB continues to develop and train to expand their services. They assist people of all ages and people from minority groups who require help with language barriers. They run a Youth Volunteer Programme and have also employed two individuals from the Supported Employment programme into their organisation.

210 They provide practical advice on issues such as financial stability as well as emotional support to reduce stress and anxiety in areas of emotional trauma including depression, bereavement, relationship issues, stress, self-harm, addiction and suicidal thoughts.

215 Good mental health and well-being is so vital in any society. CAB's commitment to addressing the emotional and psychological needs of our community are in line with my own commitment to make Gibraltar inclusive and equitable.

Madam Speaker, I would like to commend the staff and volunteers at CAB for all they do for this community.

220 Madam Speaker, I will now turn to another characteristic we have been significantly developing within Equality: disabilities. Since my tenure commenced in Oct 2023, we have been able to merge the Supported Needs and Disability Office within my ministry. We have expanded the team in order to better manage the increasing demands and essential groundwork required to improve support and accessibility for individuals with disabilities.

225 The SNDO is committed to ensuring that our services meet the needs of this community through several key initiatives, to include: Enhanced Accessibility; Inclusive Education; Employment Opportunities; Community Engagement; Awareness Campaigns: and Support Services. Through these efforts, we aim to create a more inclusive society where individuals with disabilities have equal opportunities to thrive and participate fully in all aspects of life.

230 We developed an exercise in June 2023 as part of the Government's drive to make our buildings and services more accessible and thereby providing a more inclusive service to the community. We determined the current need across departments, agencies and authorities to have fixed or portable-hearing loop facilities available to staff and public. So far we have furnished several departments with these and will endeavour to have these in place for all relevant Government departments.

235 During the month of June in 2023 we engaged in the delivery of Disability Equality and Customer Care Training to Public Sector employees who are front-line members of staff and attend to the general public. This is a continuation of consistent training over the last seven years being made available to both the public and private sectors.

240 The training highlights the different barriers faced by people with disabilities, both physically and when communicating, and what can be done to overcome or prevent these. We will be introducing Disability Co-ordinators across Government Departments and the private sector, meaning that officials can be reminded of their duty to be inclusive and promote the rights of people with disabilities in accordance with the Disability Act.

My Ministry is committed to continue delivering regular training to Government staff and the general public and is further expanding the type of training being delivered. Training has since  
245 been delivered to Royal Gibraltar Police Recruits and PGCE students. The professional development of the SNDO staff is also a priority. Expanding on the expertise of the SNDO will help in our advising of other Departments.

The team attended the online Annual Professional's Conference on empowering professionals to understand autistic experiences and to kickstart Neurodiversity Week. A representative of the  
250 SNDO attended UK Care Week, the Neuro Convention and Naidex, coined 'The UK's leading event dedicated to empowering and supporting disabled individuals'.

SNDO staff received training on Blue Badge and Frontier Pass. And I am pleased to announce we have taken over responsibility from the Ministry of Transport for the issuing of the Blue Badge Scheme, an important service for people with severe mobility issues.

255 The SNDO is now represented on the Traffic Commission and it was our pleasure to assist my colleague, the Hon. Minister Cortes and the Ministry of Transport, in the piloting of the rollout of pictograms at zebra crossings, designed to enhance accessibility and particularly benefiting children and persons with learning difficulties and disabilities.

This groundbreaking project underscores the government's commitment to inclusivity and  
260 equal access in our transport network.

We have been working with my colleague the Minister for Health and Care, the Hon. Gemma Arias Vasquez and other stakeholders to help develop neurodevelopmental pathways. This work is integral to the provision of specialised care for children with ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder, ensuring tailored support and assistance for individuals and their families.

265 Together with the Department of the Environment we have worked to ensure that persons with disabilities also have some access to the sea as from Easter. As always, arrangements were made to have beach attendants available at Camp Bay during the Easter Weekend and all weekends thereafter until the official bathing season starts.

We held a Disability Fair in December 2023 to showcase the work done by the SNDO and  
270 charities and raise awareness. This will now become an annual event.

And I am truly excited to state that we have set up the Supported Needs and Disability Council made up of 12 different support groups, charities and individuals, all linked to supported needs and disability within our community.

275 The Select Committee on people with disabilities met in the Parliament Chamber for the first time on 5th February 2024 and here we all decided to put the subject matter before politics and the progress of this is something we all agree on. I cannot emphasise the importance of this enough as having a group of people focused on disabilities will no doubt bring new ideas and effect change.

Looking ahead, in late 2024 we will be introducing suicide awareness and disability etiquette  
280 training. Initiatives such as reaching out to the community for public donations of sensory toys and equipment, so they can be borrowed by families who are in need of them not only helps others but also makes people aware of persons with disabilities and what they may need.

We also listen to the community. The recent installation of men's sanitary bins in all public  
285 toilets followed representations from 'Prostate Cancer Gibraltar'. We will be implementing all areas mentioned within the recently completed Disability Strategy to include the extension of the UN convention on the rights for persons with disabilities that my team, led by Jenny Victory, have been working very hard on for the vast majority of the last eight months.

I am committed to ensuring that the services for persons with disabilities are enhanced and  
290 focused. With this said, I wish to introduce the 'End the Stereotypes' campaign, an awareness and acceptance campaign for every protected characteristic. The Ministry of Equality together with the Press Office will be producing a video campaign with the message that we are all capable of achieving greatness when afforded the right opportunities.

Moving on to disabilities and sports. In September 2023 we saw the launch of Special Olympics Berlin 2023 Documentary. The Ministry of Equality hosted the launch of a short film documenting

295 the journey and participation of the Gibraltar Special Olympics contingent at the Berlin 2023  
Summer Games. The documentary also touched on our commitment to partnering with the  
Special Olympics who are the world's largest sports organisation for children and adults with  
intellectual disabilities.

To heighten our commitment to this and in accordance with my manifesto commitments, we  
300 are also developing on Para-sports, together with the Ministry of Sport, also known as adaptive  
sports or disability sports where sports are played by people with a disability, including physical,  
intellectual and sensory disabilities. These sports are designed to allow individuals with disabilities  
to compete in various athletic activities, promoting inclusion, physical fitness and social  
interaction. This is an integral part of our 'End the Stereotype' campaign across my Ministries.

305 I am thrilled to state that plans are already well under way for a Corporate and Family Para-  
sports day this coming September 2024 which will play a crucial role in promoting equality, health,  
and social integration for individuals with disabilities. Continued support, awareness and  
investment in these sports will help further their development and ensure that athletes with  
disabilities can compete and excel at all levels.

310 The year ahead will see a continuation of all my commitments to support and enhance our  
offerings, to include initiatives such as the Disability Information Cards, Radar Keys, Blue Badges  
and Frontier Passes. Our work with the Disability Council and charities will continue and we will  
continue to provide advice to other departments and stakeholders.

315 The 'End the Stereotypes campaign', of course is of immense importance to me as this is where  
we can hopefully change perceptions in the community. The backbone to all the work we have  
achieved and yet have to achieve as a Ministry will be reflected in the National Disability Strategy,  
which is currently in the consultation phase.

We have had the input of multi-award-winning campaigner Celia Chartres-Aris who is a lobbyist  
and policy designer and is named on the 2023 Global Diversity Leaders List. She is an expert on  
320 ensuring that persons with disabilities are at the heart of legislative development. This strategy  
will be the go-to document for Government and all other stakeholders.

My team and I are looking forward to the next year with the Strategy, the Disability Fair, Para-  
sports and the day-to-day work including clinics that make the lives of people with disabilities that  
much better in Gibraltar.

325 Madam Speaker, I now turn to another very significant and important aspect of my portfolio.

As Minister for Employment, I am responsible for training, apprenticeships and skills. I am  
grateful to take on the mantel of this portfolio from my predecessor, the Father of the House, the  
Hon. Sir Joe Bossano who has been a great source of knowledge in both the Employment and  
Training portfolios. As a Government we are fully committed to creating an environment where  
330 continuous learning and skill acquisition are prioritised. Investment in our people is the key to  
maintaining our competitive edge and ensuring sustainable growth.

My team at the ministry conducted an extensive exercise looking at over 45,000 published  
vacancies from October 2020 to date, to ascertain the gaps within the employment industries in  
Gibraltar. This has given us a clear overview of the local job market and what training programmes  
335 we need to work towards enabling.

When I came into office in October 2023, one of my primary objectives was to upgrade and  
revamp the Gibraltar Training Centre. I believe that not everyone needs to choose an academic  
route in order to succeed and I want to offer alternative avenues to career choices. My  
commitment is to provide the tools for young people to maximise their potential.

340 In the short time I have been in office we have recruited three additional instructors for the  
Training Centre in bricklaying, painting and decorating and electrical engineering. These were  
necessary in order for us to launch these essential courses as soon as possible in these areas that  
would meet industry demands.

345 At this point I wish to mention Richard Martinez, who is retiring in September after 24 years as  
an Electrical Instructor for the Centre. I want to thank him for his service and wish him the very  
best.



We have also recruited Dylan Podesta as Head of Training who brings a wealth of knowledge and experience in this area. This is instrumental in developing the courses we aim to offer. His responsibilities extend to overseeing the necessary recruitment, procedural enhancements and management.

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I am thrilled to report that on 22nd May 2024 we welcomed a new intake of 42 apprentices into the Level 1 Programme in Construction. They joined the 24 apprentices already previously enrolled at the Centre, bringing the total number to 66. Upon completion of this course, they will move to the Level 2 Programme where they can choose their preferred area of work and specialise in this.

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This coming September will see a new cohort of a further 12 apprentices to enrol in electrical and mechanical engineering courses. The vocational courses offered at the centre have always provided numerous benefits to the apprentices. This includes specialised knowledge in specific fields of work, with shorter courses available in order to allow them to enter the workforce quicker. Not only does this offer apprentices career advancement opportunities but is a positive to our community as specific industries which face labour shortages will have a skilled and qualified pool of potential employees to select from.

360

We are also in the process of rebranding the Centre reflecting our commitment to providing high-quality vocational education and training. By enhancing our brand, we hope to attract more students and stakeholders who recognise the value and potential of the opportunities we offer. We are currently exploring the option of offering further short courses for those students who may not wish to engage in a full two- to three-year apprenticeship, and we are working closely with stakeholders within the construction industry who are supporting this initiative.

365

Our work regarding apprenticeships and skills development does not stop at the training centre. We are collaborating with the GHA and the Care Agency to further develop the 'Skills for Care' course which will offer more opportunities for people interested in joining the care sector.

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We will also be continuing our collaboration with the insurance sector offering apprenticeships and work experience within this industry which will lead to FIT training. This is the basic qualification required in order to progress further within the insurance industry.

375

We are also exploring offering training in the hospitality sector. Plans for this are in their embryonic stage, but there is potential to provide training in this area too. Training, apprenticeships and skills development is not just beneficial, but absolutely essential for fostering individual growth, business success and economic vitality. This ensures that both individuals and organisations are well-equipped to meet the demands of the future. Investing in training is imperative for creating a more prosperous and equitable society.

380

Skills development is at the heart of my next initiative, the PATHS Programme. I mentioned this in passing recently in my Equality portfolio. But my Ministries are so interconnected that a lot of what my team and I are working on will feature in more than one area in my speech.

With the launch of the Professional Advancement Through Holistic Skills (PATHS) programme in April this year, our team is addressing the professional development of members of our community who may not have the resources to upskill themselves, both personally and professionally.

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PATHS is aimed at individuals who require support in the workplace, to include those transitioning from Supported Employment Programmes, prison inmates, individuals undergoing rehabilitation, or those who need to increase their employability via the ETB. These demographics often face unique challenges and barriers to employment, and PATHS offers tailored support and a personalised learning experience to help them overcome these obstacles and thrive in the workforce.

390

Our packages have been tailored to the needs of the current job skill gaps within the labour market which we have identified. These are currently courses in General Employability, Construction and Maintenance, Hospitality and Care, Retail and Development courses.

395

The courses are provided through an online platform, as well as face to face workshops. The courses are conducted at the Digital Skills Academy, who I wish to thank for their continued support.

400 On successful completion, participants receive certification from the course provider officially endorsed by myself on behalf of the Ministry.

Services also focus on confidence building, communication skills, mental health support and job coaching to ensure a well-rounded and effective support system.

405 Surveys completed by users are recording 100% positive feedback and all users have reported wishing to continue this training. Since its inception three months ago, PATHS has already engaged with 29 users from the Supported Employment Programme.

We would like to thank the Barzilai Foundation for their collaboration of this programme

410 Madam Speaker, the Supported Employment Programme has been developed further by my Ministry to build on the great work my esteemed colleague, the father of the House, the Hon. Sir Joe Bossano has already done through the Supported Employment Company which he founded to assist persons with supported needs and disabilities.

415 The company is now the financial arm of the programme. My staff have had extensive training as job coaches by the British Association of Supported Employment (BASE) who are the UK's national umbrella group for the supported employment sector. Their training is ongoing as part of my commitment to their own professional development, which will in turn benefit our candidates. We are now active members of BASE and will be attending their annual conference in November, to continue our dynamic alignment with our UK counterparts.

420 The team has created a bespoke 12-step working model, which is followed closely in order to identify candidates who meet the criteria to form part of the programme. A policy has also been produced by our team. Our Supported Employment Board reviews referrals and my staff works closely with the Supported Needs and Disability Office to hold clinics for these candidates.

425 Together they carry out vocational profiles to identify any skill gaps, and of course strengths to match the right employee with the right employer. Any skill gaps can be filled with our PATHS programme. We are actively seeking out employers to take part in our Supported Employment Programme. To this end, my Ministry organised a conference at the Sunborn on 5th June, called 'Empowering Journeys, Igniting Careers'. The conference was a resounding success, with 150 attendees from the private and public sector.

430 As a result of this we have made further engagement with potential employers who were inspired to be a part of our programme. Our aim is to eventually transition people from supported positions to direct and sustainable employment.

I would like to thank the Barzilai foundation once again for their sponsorship of this conference.

435 This programme is not just designed for people with supported needs or disabilities. Our Ministry is also developing the 'Rehabilitation and Prison Leavers' Employment Scheme', for persons who are undergoing rehabilitation or currently serving a prison sentence. This initiative is in close collaboration with Bruce's Farm, HMP Windmill Hill, the Department of Employment and other entities.

440 Our Ministry has established various working groups to develop this scheme to develop areas of Education, legislation and other initiatives, such as projects within the wood workshop at Windmill Hill. Our aim is to give every individual a pathway after leaving prison and this is a programme developed together with my colleagues the Minister for Justice and the Minister for Health and Care.

445 My ministry is also working with the GFA to use football as a vehicle for change and reform within the prison setting. Applied philosophy will also be taught to the prison cohort. We are also collaborating with various practitioners to develop communication skills, self esteem and general well-being at Bruce's Farm and HMP Windmill Hill, which I consider to be extremely important to the efficacy of the programme. Our extensive research has established the various job skill gaps within the labour market in Gibraltar and we are creating pathways to employment in these sectors.

450 Upon successful completion of the PATHS programme at HMP or in the rehabilitation programme at Bruce's Farm, the aim is to find employment for the user for six months under our scheme. This initiative will not only give the individual a sense of structure, purpose and empowerment, remunerated gainful employment will also assist in the reduction of reoffending and relapse rates. These are all really positive points for our society.

455 Madam Speaker, employment is important, for all individuals and for our community, not just economically but for well-being. So I now turn to my Employment portfolio.

My team and I continue to work tirelessly in the areas of employment and workers' rights, recognising that in the context of employment and labour-associated matters, everyone deserves access to justice and this is paramount to our administration.

460 Our commitment is demonstrated through the enforcement of fair and equitable opportunities to seek legal recourse, ensuring due process and protection of rights. The Labour Inspectorate is tasked with the regulation and enforcement of our employment laws, executing a rigorous programme of inspections across the various industries, to maintain compliance with employment legislation. This forms part of our over-arching strategy towards the eradication of illegal labour in Gibraltar.

465 The Department of Employment maintains a close and effective relationship with all sectors of the business community, ensuring a level playing field that promotes an environment of compliance with employment legislation. The Inspectorate remains a vital source for both employers and employees, offering guidance on all employment-related matters.

470 The Frontier Worker portal has successfully handled over 16,440 enquiries since its inception in December 2020, reflecting a high level of engagement. Over the past year, the Department has responded to a significant volume of email and telephone enquiries relating to employee statuses, providing technical guidance and clarifying workers' rights under the scope of the Withdrawal Agreement.

475 The Department of Employment continues to assist in investigating individual worker statuses while also sign-posting to various other Government Departments to ensure that workers' rights and services in Gibraltar are accessible and comprehensively addressed.

480 On the Employment Tribunal, I am pleased to share that the recent reforms have been successful and are now yielding tangible results. The Tribunal has significantly improved the efficiency of handling cases, ensuring that claims are addressed effectively. These improvements are part of a wider effort to enhance the overall user experience, promising a higher standard of service for all users who seek assistance from the Tribunal. This achievement reflects our steadfast commitment to maintaining a fair and responsive tribunal system.

485 Madam Speaker, I now take the opportunity to draw your attention to the important work we have been engaged in as part of the Health and Safety Advisory Council, which I have had the privilege of Chairing.

490 Last November, we successfully held our second Health and Safety seminar, focusing on 'Providing Safe and Healthy Work in the Digital Age'. This event featured talks by the heads of all public service, representatives from local charities and notably, local employers. We were also joined by the National Health and Safety Advisor from Unite the Union and the Chairman of the Institute of Occupational Safety in Gibraltar. The seminar was highly successful, facilitating meaningful discussions and providing actionable insights into Health & Safety practices within the digital framework.

495 Looking ahead, we are already preparing for this year's seminar, earmarked for 24th October 2024. The theme will be 'Building Sustainable Safety in a Rapidly Changing World'. This event further highlights our commitment to enhancing workplace safety and adaptability in this constantly changing environment.

500 In terms of the Registered Unemployed, I am pleased to report the following results and outcomes. Maintaining low unemployment levels is possible due to the consistent efforts of my dedicated team in the Department of Employment. The yearly average number for Gibraltarian registered unemployed in 2023 was 27, as already highlighted in the Chief Minister's opening

speech. This represents an impressive 93.86% reduction in unemployment since 2011, demonstrating the effectiveness of our initiatives.

Furthermore, the First Quarter of 2024, saw an average of only 20 registered unemployed Gibraltarians, a staggering 96% reduction in unemployment since the First Quarter of 2012.

505 Madam Speaker, the Government's proven employment stability is built on maintaining close working relationships, understanding and empathising with the specific individual seeking employment. Our approach has always been holistic, with a fundamental focus on understanding and addressing the specific needs of persons who are not in employment. This achievement is not merely about statistical success but a testament to our strategic planning, robust policy  
510 implementation and effective coordination across various departments.

Our Employment Officers have been instrumental in reinforcing our commitment to workforce integration, working in close collaboration with my team at the Youth Service, ensuring a seamless referral process to bridge the gap for individuals eager to enter the workforce. We are committed to provide the necessary tools and support to all users seeking gainful employment. The  
515 Department of Employment remains a pivotal resource for those looking to explore new opportunities or aiming to enhance their career trajectories. Users are guided to find positions that best match their interests and skills through personalised guidance.

We not only support individual career aspirations, we are also bolstering our community's economic stability and growth. Our commitment is to continue these efforts, ensuring that all  
520 service users have the resources they need to succeed in today's dynamic job market.

Madam Speaker, this Department's success and value is not just evident in the statistics presented but in the quality of the support provided. Our commitment is to continue this momentum and ensure that our employment landscape remains as strong and promising. This  
525 commitment is at the heart of our strategy, and it is reflected in the tangible results produced.

With this focus on employment, my team and I are keen to create opportunities for the younger generation also, so it is with great honour and responsibility that I now speak about the Ministry of Youth. I would like to thank my predecessor the Hon. Steven Linares for his fantastic  
530 work over the past 12 years. Having worked with young people myself my mission is to empower, inspire and support our younger generations as we recognise them to be the future leaders, innovators and change-makers of our society.

In this Ministry, we always aim to address the needs and aspirations of our youth, ensuring they have the opportunities, resources and support necessary to thrive in an increasingly dynamic and challenging world. Our commitment is to create an environment where every young person can achieve their full potential, contributing positively to our community and beyond.

535 One of the ways we are empowering our youth into employment is with our Careers.gi website. This was launched in July 2023 and is designed to provide professional development opportunities to the young – and the not so young. This tool provides access to detailed information about local career paths to empower and to plan their education and career trajectories effectively. The aim is for it to become the central hub for all career-related information, resources and opportunities.

540 The Careers.gi website is a collaboration project between the CIPD Gibraltar Branch and the Gibraltar Youth Service currently sponsored by the Kusuma Trust. And a special thank you to Charlene Figueras for leading on this project from the Ministry of Youth. Our key priority this year is to continue developing the website with quality relevant content and expand the career options and training opportunities sections.

545 We are collaborating with employers and Government agencies to ensure information about their sector or industry is represented. Accessibility and usability of course, is at the fore, so everyone can benefit from the resources available. This platform for career development is an investment in our future workforce. The Youth Service focuses on varied areas: Education and Skills; Development, Health and Well-being; Employment and Entrepreneurship, Civic  
550 Engagement and Leadership; Sports and Recreation; and last but not least, Arts and Culture.

Madam Speaker, I am elated to stand here today and confirm we have seen an increase in the use of our facilities this year by 6.9%. We have seen over 200 users coming into our clubs every week and on average 9.6 outreach users per month.

555 In a 12-month period we have provided our services an average of 10,400 times, without including the additional outreach we also engage in. The commitment of my staff is evident through the extensive array of activities and trips planned throughout the year. It is also evident in their commitment to the training and professional development programmes they attend in order to be fully equipped to provide adequate risk assessments for these events. Some staff also continue to form part of and contribute to various multi-agency forums, to include the Child  
560 Protection Committee, Sub-Training Committee and the Youth Grants Committee.

Madam Speaker, our service users work on projects to engage and educate and express their unique viewpoints in order to feel validated. An example of this is the 'Your Voice Matters' project, an art exhibition for Mental Health Week where they created artworks based on their unique interpretations of the theme.

565 The Voice of Young People continued to meet weekly with representation from Youth Clubs, secondary schools and the college. They have continued to engage with organisations of interest, as well as Ministers and their Ministries. The Youth Production Group also meet weekly working on different projects throughout the year and the Youth Café is an open club environment that opens twice a week for young people aged 16+ to relax and enjoy a safe space where they can  
570 share ideas, thoughts and opinions.

The Mingle project is in its 5th year and supports young adults ages 18-30 with mild learning needs with the aim of increasing their support networks and life skills. They continue to be part of the Youth Café and have engaged in a variety of activities and projects that support the development of their independence and life skills through targeted activities and workshops.

575 Thursday evenings are still and continue to be open to young people aged 11 to 15 as a drop-in service. The Youth Service took part in the careers project in the Civil Services Excellence and Innovation Awards led by our Chief Secretary whereby they had been nominated for their partnership work with the Education Department and CIPD. This project was designed to give year-12 students the experience of attending career industry panel discussions which provided  
580 them with valuable insights and practical guidance on their career options.

Local industry professionals from 15 separate sectors including Health and Social Care, Law, Finance, Media and the Arts were brought together to create a dynamic learning environment that bridges the gap between academic knowledge and real-world applications. By engaging directly with industry leaders, students gained a deeper understanding of different career paths, the skills required and the opportunities available in their fields of interest.  
585

We are also expanding our career development programme in collaboration with the Chief Secretary's office, Department of Employment, Department of Education and CIPD to reintroduce the careers fair to a younger demographic. The aim is to offer every young person a pathway into their chosen career and show them their options early on within their educational journey.

590 The service also host annual Youth Days to showcase our users' accomplishments and foster community engagement, such as recently organising a trip to Morocco made possible through the generous contributions of private donors. This initiative provided our members with the unique opportunity to explore beyond our borders, experiencing different cultures and lifestyles that they would not ordinarily have the chance to.

595 We are also in collaboration with the GFA to develop street football with the aim to foster not only physical health but also social, economic and cognitive development.

Madam Speaker, in November of 2023 I had the pleasure of creating the First Youth Symposium in Gibraltar with the aim of focusing on important issues relevant to young people. This provides them with a platform to share their experiences and have their voices heard with a view to shape policies and make change where necessary.  
600

Since coming into Office in October 2023, we have had three successful meetings where we have heard what is important to them. In turn, our role has been to nurture their concerns,

provide guidance and or solutions, foster a sense of community and promote a positive impact on their lives.

605 It is with this in mind that we decided to launch the NEET project, for those 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' and The Zone, Step Up and Thrive projects within this. This is solely to focus on individuals typically between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not engaged in any form of work, educational pursuits, or vocational training.

610 This project has benefited from collaborative work between all my ministries: Employment, the Disability Office and Supported Employment, with further training avenues now more recently extended with our PATHS Programme. Youth Workers are licensed to deliver the 'Star Model' which is an evidence-based tool for measuring and supporting change when working with young people.

615 This programme is also offered to young people attending 'The Zone' to support their decision-making skills and help them grow and achieve. Since its inception, the Zone has met with 52 people seeking support over 20 sessions with many repeat clients, some attending up to three or four times based on their individual needs. The format of a session includes completing an initial inquiry form and reviewing an existing CV. I consider it our responsibility to intervene early, equipping these individuals with the tools necessary to lead a successful and meaningful life.

620 Madam Speaker, at the beginning of the year, in line with my vision and manifesto commitments, I engaged Senior Youth Worker, Ms Rebecca Figueras to develop a Youth Strategy targeting young people aged eight to 25 years. I have the pleasure of confirming that this has already been completed and we are in the final consultation phases in order to launch what will be a structured and comprehensive framework to address the needs, aspirations and challenges  
625 faced by young people within our society.

The strategy will include empowerment opportunities, a holistic development of our young people to enhance their educational backgrounds, boost employability, well-being and overall health and fully equip them to face the challenges of their future. This strategy will undoubtedly contribute to them leading fulfilling lives.

630 The development process, which spanned from February to June, involved stakeholder engagement. It captured the voices of young people from the Youth Service as well as the Youth Symposium. In addition to gathering feedback from young people, the process involved stakeholder engagements with key departments and agencies that deliver both statutory and non-statutory services to the youth.

635 These included the Department of Education, the Care Agency and the Departments of Employment, Training, Equality and Disability. The aim was to explore cross overs in policy direction, how the strategy aligns with existing services and identify gaps where additional support or resources may be needed. The development of the Youth Strategy for Gibraltar represents a critical step towards ensuring that the voices of young people are heard and that their needs are  
640 met in a comprehensive and meaningful way, reflective of their lived experiences and responsive to their aspirations. A document on the findings and framework will be released in the coming months.

645 Madam Speaker, the potential of our youth *cannot* be overstated. They hold the keys to a brighter, more innovative future and it is our responsibility to provide them with the tools, opportunities and support they need to thrive. From the fields of street football to the classrooms and beyond, we must foster environments that encourage growth, resilience and a global perspective.

650 In the words of Franklin Roosevelt, 'We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future'. And that is exactly what my intention is and will continue to be.

Another department within my remit which I am honoured to serve is that of Drugs and Alcohol Rehabilitation Services (DARS). Addiction is an issue that affects millions of lives across the globe and unfortunately here in Gibraltar too. In the past year we have seen a 40% increase in

admissions. Although some may see this as negative, it signals positive developments in  
655 addressing substance abuse, promoting recovery and enhancing overall societal well-being.

It represents a shift towards a more compassionate and effective approach to addiction  
treatment and support. The journey of recovery from drugs and alcohol addiction is not just a  
medical or social issue, it is a deeply human one, touching families, communities and individuals  
from all walks of life.

660 Our rehabilitation programmes play a crucial role in this journey. They provide not only medical  
and psychological support but also a compassionate community that understands the  
complexities of addiction. These programmes offer a beacon of hope, guiding individuals towards  
a healthier, more fulfilling life.

In the past year we have completely revised policies and updated staff and client procedures,  
665 implemented new timetables and restructured programme delivery. We have maximised  
effective counsellor time within the residential in-house service, allocated clinical time, so  
aftercare group sessions in the community continue and most importantly executed therapeutic  
1-to-1 session for DARS clients in the community to be fully reinstated and operational.

The re-establishment of the Drugs Advisory Council has been welcomed by all and it is  
670 imperative to have a multi-agency approach to achieve solutions to the problems our community  
faces surrounding drugs in terms of education *and* rehabilitation.

We have also been able to secure and maintain community support, significant and beneficial  
links with GHA, and we have developed a Drugs and Alcohol Services Pathway plan which focuses  
on the importance of an inter-agency approach.

675 We have established a 'Dry House' within the community as a second stage process for clients  
completing Bruce's Farm and re-entering the community. This is a flat with capacity for four  
clients. Discussions are underway regarding a second dry house for female clients.

Community Therapeutic support continues both at HMP Windmill Hill and running Relapse  
Prevention Group, Phoenix and Freedom Programmes. Post-Freedom monthly Support Group is  
680 also being run. The Voice Programme has also already commenced.

Discussions have been held with the Gibraltar Youth Services Team in relation to younger DARS  
clients aged between 18 years to 25 years, with emphasis on psycho-education and respite co-  
work pertinent to younger clients integrating into community. The journey to recovery from drugs  
and alcohol is one of the most challenging, yet rewarding, paths one can take.

685 At our rehabilitation service, we are committed to the support, resources and unwavering  
belief in their ability to reclaim their lives. The battle against addiction is not fought alone, it  
requires a collective effort from families and the community. With an environment of  
understanding, support and education we can break the stigma surrounding addiction and  
encourage more individuals to seek the help they need.

690 I now have the pleasure of moving on to another of my ministries which I am personally  
invested in: Culture.

Madam Speaker, it seems like only yesterday we were at 'the Count' for the 2023 General  
Elections held once again at the John Mackintosh Hall where Gibraltar Cultural Services staff  
assisted Parliament with the arrangements. Following the elections I was delighted to have been  
695 appointed Culture as one of my Ministries. Culture and the arts have been my life and my  
livelihood so to be able to continue working with the great talent in this sector here in Gibraltar is  
a real privilege.

Great work was done by my predecessor and friend, the Hon. Minister Cortes, I would like to  
thank him for leaving me a very well-oiled machine with a lot of new initiatives that my team and  
700 I will continue to work towards to ensure our cultural offering and its development, both locally  
and abroad, remains at the heart of this Government's agenda.

Daily cultural activity and increased cultural services, our commitment to develop our arts at  
an international level, our priority with cultural education, through residencies, exchanges and  
courses are all examples of the work already earmarked for the new financial year by Gibraltar

705 Cultural Services, working as passionately and diligently as ever on behalf of my Ministry of Culture.

I am very proud of what has been achieved over the decades in this field. Our culture is the glue that holds our society together and is an imperative part of our cultural identity. Through events, cultural development and education, improvements and investment in cultural facilities and premises, I pledge that together with all stakeholders we will ensure culture continues to thrive and grow from strength to strength.

To this end, there have been myriad events organised this past year. The Calentita Festival returned in July 2023 held at both John Mackintosh Square and Campion Park and will be held again this Saturday, 5th July, so I hope to see everyone here attending this Saturday.

715 This festival is a family event aimed at showcasing our varied gastronomy from our traditional dishes to newer cuisines which have also been adopted into our culture. This event is the kind of tourism-led event we are working on promoting to attract more visitors to Gibraltar.

Events such as this, the Festival of Lights, the cavalcade and concerts are the types of offerings which put The Rock on the map internationally both culturally and for tourism. GCS assisted the Ministry of Tourism by providing staffing and logistics support at last year's Gibraltar International Literary Festival. GCS also organised a very successful Gibraltar Literature Week in November 2023 where they provided a fitting platform to local authors.

720 The week included 'An Audience With', Lightning Talks, and a Poetry and Music theatre event highlighting our *Llanito* flair. Offerings were further opened to the public with a writing workshop by Jonathan Pizarro, a playwriting workshop by Louis Emmitt-Stern given to school children, press writeups, interviews and more.

The 'Trovadores and Poets' event was a new concept devised as part of the week to promote the written work through poetry and music promoting our *Llanito* voice. We are very grateful to all our local authors for their support. To celebrate the best of Gibraltar's arts and culture the 5th Cultural Awards was held at the Sunborn Hotel on 29th November and aired live on GBC. The Awards highlight the potential, ability, talent and achievements of the cultural community who work on behalf of us all and for our collective entertainment.

730 Madam Speaker, the Christmas season is a busy time in our cultural calendar. The Christmas Wonderland held in November moved to Casemates Square fulfilling our manifesto commitment to make it bigger and better than ever. Six thousand people attended the Festival of Lights and 2,000 people attended the Christmas Party. The two-day event provided entertainment by local cultural groups and the hugely popular international act Boney M. The Christmas attractions at John Mackintosh Square entertained younger members of our community for over six weeks. In conjunction to all this, the late-night shopping in Town attracted many visitors and supported our business community.

740 Business was also enhanced by the two Christmas Saturdays held in Town, with entertainment including marching bands, dance groups, rock bands and choirs. The festive season was brought to a close by the return of the New Year's celebrations at Casemates Square, produced on our behalf by *Gibmedia*. This and the Three Kings Cavalcade are both highlights of our social and cultural calendars and thousands of people of all ages, from Gibraltar and further afield, enjoyed the spectacles.

745 Although our backing of the cavalcade was questioned in Parliament, the Chief Minister reiterated our unwavering support for this offering and a publication of a letter by the Cavalcade Committee refuted any hint of dissatisfaction. I would like to thank the committee for their sterling work to make sure this annual event continues to be one of the highlights for our local community.

750 And 2024 also started strong with the 9th edition of the ever-popular GibTalks, organised in collaboration with Julian Felice, and giving an insight into the lived experiences of many varied interesting speakers.



755 For the younger cohort and as part of the Youth Arts Jamboree, the Festival for Young Musicians organised by GAMPA was held at the John Mackintosh Hall Theatre giving a platform for musicians from Gibraltar and abroad to show off their talent.

760 Still on our young people, the Young Art Competitive Exhibition displayed the potential and achievements of the younger generation and World Book Day was celebrated and attended by school children. Based on the books of popular children's authors, this day is designed to encourage our youth to enjoy literature. The Jamboree is part of our ongoing cultural drive to encourage young people to be the cultural leaders of tomorrow.

765 Over two thousand upper primary and secondary school students were introduced to classic theatre with a twist. The Young Shakespeare Company returned to Gibraltar in May 2024 with several performances of Shakespeare's *'Henry V'*. A huge thanks to the John Mackintosh Trust, for their support with this event.

Acting for all ages was encouraged with the annual Gibraltar International Drama Festival, in its 67th edition. This is the highlight of theatre goers in Gibraltar year on year and as a seasoned contributor, a personal highlight for me, too.

770 Madam Speaker, the lasting impact of John Mackintosh was highlighted and commemorated on the 60th Anniversary of the John Mackintosh Hall with an art exhibition, a writing workshop by Gabriel Moreno promoting memories of the cultural centre, and a talk by Richard Garcia on the man himself and his legacy. Thanks to his belief and support in the arts, so many generations have had access to this space to continue learning and creating.

775 One of the highlights of the summer was the return of Melon Diesel who celebrated the 25th anniversary of their album *'La Cuesta de Mister Bond'* with a performance to 2,000 people at the Europa Sports indoor complex. This event was produced at no cost to the Government and had a great reach to fans from Gibraltar and from Spain, where this local export found fame and success obtaining a platinum record and two gold records over their career.

780 On behalf of the Ministry, GCS has also run its annual programme of events and festivals, to include the Autumn and Spring events, international art competitions, the ever-popular Gibraltar Fair and National Day events, Worker's Memorial Day and Classical Concerts.

785 Madam Speaker, GCS also focus on cultural development and education. We supported the Guernsey Island Games cultural programme with writers and artist participation, resulting in works selected for the *'Pocket Island Poetry Open'* publication amongst other competing nations.

Gibraltar was represented at the Cambridge University Symposium 2023 which focused on *'Llanito, Culture and Writing'*. Gibraltarian authors and international academics focused on language use, literary expression and other aspects of our Gibraltarian identity.

790 As Minister for Culture I want to continue this emphasis on our unique language. Participation at the Malta Book Fair 2023 allowed GCS to share ideas and best practices with our Maltese counterparts on how to support local writers in editing, publishing and distribution. We have also supported a linguistic research project from the University of Seville with promotion and activities in Gibraltar.

795 The continued Cultural Exchange with Morocco saw the launch of *'Isthmus'* an art exhibition showcasing three artists from Morocco organised in conjunction with the JM Memorial Foundation and Gallery Kent in Tangier. This was an opportunity to highlight all the work done to promote cultural and artistic links with Tangier over the last few years.

800 World Book Day 2024 attracted hundreds of students to the John Mackintosh Hall to celebrate the books of David Walliams. Storytelling, art activities and performances, that gave the children a fun yet educational day. The John Mackintosh Library is continually promoted with school visits and tours and pupils are actively encouraged to become members. Our support of local authors continued with participation at the London Book Fair which was a milestone event.

805 Representation from Gibraltar's authors illustrators and academics gave us the opportunity to network and explore literary opportunities. We presented our cultural heritage and literary voice to a global audience. Our younger authors from Young Enterprise, *Tiny Minds*, were helped with

their *Llanito* publication '*¡Vamonos! Let's Go*'. We want to encourage the love of reading and writing at a young age. We also supported the 'The BookClub' TV programme produced by GBC.

810 Madam Speaker, our support for all things cultural have seen us involved in varied projects to include a Maria Callas experimental film by Nina Danino where a special screening took place at the Inces Hall, starting a Silent Book Club at BookGem and the launch of a Culture Crawl where the Llanito Dr Ryan Asquez led enthusiasts on a walk promoting history, heritage and culture through Street Art.

Apart from literature, supporting art is also big on my agenda. The new look GEMA Gallery logo was borne from a competition which attracted 80 entries from 36 participants.

815 A pop-up exhibition at the John Mackintosh Hall featured the Sky Arts Landscape Portrait Artist of the Year, Monica Popham. We are very proud of Monica's accomplishments, she has been a staple of the local art scene since a very young age and deserves all the international recognition.

I must also mention Shane Dalmedo, whose sculpture 'Sunday Drive' was selected from thousands of entries as one of the exhibits for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

820 I cannot emphasise how important it is to me to ensure we continue nurturing our artists and creatives. To do this we have to educate and expose our young people to art. The fun and educational tours of the Mario Finlayson National Art Gallery show off our art heritage, GEMA gallery promotes modern art, and the Street Art tours continue to put art on show in the context of its surroundings and outside the more conventional exhibition settings.

825 The Street Art murals across Gibraltar continue to be refurbished and street Art Walks are a popular tour with schools and for tourists, promoted on [buytickets.gi](http://buytickets.gi). Marketing and promotion of all events and offerings are at the heart of our activities, using varied social media and more traditional press outlets.

830 GCS also continues to work with the Gibraltar Tourist Board to run a 'Visit Gibraltar' campaign of our national contemporary galleries. The historic and interesting City Hall has hosted school visits and international groups from Spain and Morocco visiting through the Mayor's Office. And I must say, I pride myself in being the catalyst to bring weddings to the City Hall. This building offers a picturesque backdrop to ceremonies for residents and visitors alike who can immerse themselves in the art and history of their surroundings on their special day.

835 Madam Speaker, GCS also collaborates with the Ministry for Sport in its Summer and mid-term sports and leisure programme providing cultural initiatives and opportunities for these events. This year we will once again be supporting 'The Mindspace Project' in its cultural summer programme. GCS also runs and administers the Cultural Organisations Register which is a live document and is continually updated, in line with the Child Protection policy. Safeguarding Children courses are given to all the relevant groups and individuals as required.

The following of best practices and legislation is at the fore of all things cultural with my commitment to provide a more efficient service. The new Cultural Act will be brought to Parliament in the coming weeks and will make provision for the management, enhancement and enjoyment of culture in Gibraltar and will provide for all other connected cultural matters.

845 My team are also working on a new Entertainments Act which will clarify processes and streamline policies for users and members of the public.

850 Madam Speaker, GCS are the proud custodians of the Government's Art Collection on behalf of the Ministry of Culture. Over the last year we have acquired 54 artworks at a total of £52,244. This collection is added to discerningly, with each piece contributing to a one-of-a-kind compilation of Gibraltar's artistic story, both historic and contemporary.

On the subject of collections, I must now mention the ever-popular John Mackintosh Hall Library, still Gibraltar's only public-lending library. Membership is steadily growing, now standing at 6,212 members with a total of 455 new members joining between September 2023 and April 2024.

855 BorrowBox, the platform for the loaning of eBooks and Audiobooks is also continually increasing with registered members standing at 784. Library tours and weekly storytelling continue to be subscribed. I wish to thank our committed group of volunteer storytellers who are

there week after week. The collection of books written by Gibraltarian authors on themes related to Gibraltar is also being added to.

860 With the continued expert management by GCS and support by the public, the Library, part of John Mackintosh's legacy, will continue to grow from strength to strength. All of our cultural facilities need to be refurbished and maintained in order to support our cultural entities, groups and individuals. t

865 A total of £325,609 has been spent on the Central Hall, Inces Hall, John Mackintosh Hall, the Gustavo Bacarisas and GEMA Galleries and the City Hall. The upkeep and enhancement of these venues is an investment, not just in our arts, but in our community. Part of this enhancement is improving accessibility so our spaces are inclusive for all members of our community.

As Minister for Equality this is paramount to my Ministry and me.

870 On behalf of the Ministry of Culture, GCS continue to make significant progress in the maintenance of all Government premises and estates. Some major and minor works have taken place at several locations with an investment of £125,339.

The work done by GCS is of immense quality and value. Community cultural events are very much publicised. The work done behind the scenes to drive our culture into the future is less known. I hope my report here today puts the day-to-day efforts in the spotlight.

875 For the next financial year, in addition to our annual calendar of events we plan to continue promoting our Llanito language with attendance at the University of Vigo's next symposium. A new cultural TV programme in conjunction with GBC, based on Llanito and our unique expression, is expected to air later this year.

880 The 6th Cultural Awards will be held at the Sunborn Hotel in November to continue celebrating our creatives, and as testament to our commitment to have a varied programme for all niches and tastes December will see the return of the Magic Festival, which has not been staged in Gibraltar for nearly five years.

885 My Ministry, supported as ever by GCS will continue with the key development plans for Culture as part of our Manifesto. These include the recent reinstatement of the Gibraltar Arts Advisory Council. This is of immense importance as the members are well placed and understand the priorities that we need to be addressing.

890 Over the next four years my team will be working on the creation of or enhancement of cultural premises. We will introduce a new subsidy for performers as part of a new Elite Funding programme which will help young people with funding in approved schools and academies for specific courses.

Madam Speaker, I am sure that all the above will appear quite ambitious, but with the support of my colleagues here today, my teams and my ministries and the community, these will all become reality.

895 Madam Speaker, as part of my portfolio I am also Minister for Commercial Aviation and the Gibraltar Air Terminal. Today I would like to proudly present the improvements we have achieved throughout the last year which has had a particular focus on the continued development and enhancement of Gibraltar's air terminal. Our air terminal is not only a vital gateway for tourism and business but also a crucial element in our efforts to establish Gibraltar as a regional hub for aviation and commerce.

900 We are privileged to have this facility within our small grounds which plays an indispensable role in our economy. It facilitates the movement of thousands of passengers annually, connecting our community to the wider world and supporting local businesses. This current year I am happy to report we have seen an increase of 5.5% in aircraft movements in comparison to 2023. This is particularly due to non-scheduled flights coming into Gibraltar by private aircraft.

905 Madam Speaker, we have seen the *highest* annual recorded amount since the new Air Terminal came into operation, with 488 movements throughout 2023. The first quarter of 2024 is showing similar traffic levels, so it appears that this increasing trend will continue. During the coming summer months, we already have 32 weekly flights and this equates to approximately four to five flights per day.

910 Winter flights are already on sale by the airlines and although the final version of the flight schedule will still need confirmation over the next few months, the initial programme shows similar frequencies and the same destinations as last winter, so no major changes are expected yet.

Investing in the renewal of airside equipment for Handling Agents offers several specific advantages that support the broader benefits of increasing aircraft movement in Gibraltar.

915 Here are the key benefits: within this we have in the past year invested in the renewal of airside equipment for the Handling Agents as some of these were getting to their end of life or needed replacing. Four pieces of equipment were procured which will greatly assist operations and improve efficiency: 1xDiesel Pushback Truck, 1xElectric Tractor, as well as 2XAviramp.

920 Our Government has also invested in four extra explosive trace detectors to cope with the increased demand in security and safety applications to detect minute traces of explosive materials, and these are already in place and in use.

We have also improved and replaced the paving airside and landslide, and seen a major upgrade to the airside catering concession being carried out by the current occupier. We have had maintenance works to the whole of the roof and seen major refurbishment to the chiller units, this being the equipment that cools the air that then circulates through the building.

925 Search ratios, critical in evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of search efforts were increased on 1st June 2024 in line with the UK and with the view of remaining compliant with the Regulations in place and passengers will experience a higher incidence of these.

930 With regard to staffing, our Air Terminal have continued maintaining their competencies and qualifications to ensure that everyone is compliant with the different regulations. An Air Terminal internal training event was carried out in March which focused on the Air Terminal response to Gibraltar Airport Emergency Orders, where the current procedures were tested and will be reviewed with any findings.

935 To conclude on this aspect of my portfolio, I will highlight the significant advancements we have undertaken and the vital role these improvements play within our nation. We have invested, as mentioned, in state-of-the-art Aviramps, ensuring step-free, obstacle-free access for *all* passengers. These innovations are more than just enhancements; they are commitments to inclusivity and convenience, making travel accessible and comfortable for everyone.

940 Moreover, our ongoing efforts to procure next generation Security Screening Equipment underscore our dedication to safety and efficiency. These technological advancements will not only streamline our security processes but also bring our screening standards to the forefront, matching the highest international benchmarks for hold-baggage screening.

945 These improvements are not just about keeping pace with technological advancements, they are about setting new standards in passenger experience, safety and operational efficiency. Our air terminal is a gateway not just to destinations, but to possibilities. It represents our dedication to progress, safety and the highest level of service for all who pass through its doors.

I now turn to my responsibilities and I am sure you are glad to hear my last portfolio, Tourism.

950 Madam Speaker, the cruise industry significantly contributes to our economy with increased activity in retail shops and hospitality outlets. As she has already mentioned, I am working together with my colleague and friend the Minister for the Port, the Hon Gemma Arias-Vasquez on a new cruise terminal and port master plan to ensure that our port, one of our main entry points, can work cohesively for everyone's benefit.

955 Beyond the immediate impact, the cruising industry generates revenue for various tourist sites and benefits both direct and peripheral suppliers. Sustained growth in this sector requires constant engagement and keeping abreast of new trends and concepts within the industry.

In 2023 we saw 168 cruise calls and this year we are set to increase cruise calls by 12% to 188 cruise calls. Although these figures are prone to fluctuate, we should see a further increase of 25% to 233 cruise calls already booked for 2025, going well above 2019's 197 cruise calls.

960 These numbers need to be attributed to the great work done by my predecessor the Honourable Vijay Daryanani who worked tirelessly promoting the cruising sector.

Madam Speaker, sustainability is an essential part of the cruise industry at present. The Gibraltar Port is now, as already mentioned, able to conduct LNG bunkering which enables us to cater to the new ships that have this capability and is a catalyst to attract new vessels. We also  
965 provide Biofuels bringing alternative fuels to the forefront of the sustainability direction of cruise companies.

Madam Speaker, we have had the pleasure of hosting exclusive networking dinners with top level cruise executives, and the first in the year was in May 2023 at the Cruise Line International Association (CLIA), their event in Southampton.

970 We held another of these events in November whilst at the World Travel Market in London where we co-hosted a dinner with Travel Weekly, the most influential B2B travel source in the industry. I was delighted to have the opportunity to share the Gibraltar Tourist Board's vision for Gibraltar's product with such a distinguished audience such as the President of Carnival UK, the President of Cunard and senior representatives from P&O Cruises and other leading cruise  
975 agencies.

These two events were a productive way to connect with high-level industry leaders. It is important to engage with all levels of cruise organisations to ensure Gibraltar is kept at the forefront of the cruising industry.

The Gibraltar Tourist Board attended two events providing networking opportunities with the  
980 more Med-centric side of the cruise business: the Med-cruise general assembly event in Corfu in May 2023 and Seatrade Europe in Hamburg, as an exhibitor. We remain committed to invest in this type of event creating visibility for our destination and cementing our position as an important cruise centre in the Mediterranean.

The Gibraltar Tourist Board team attended the CLIA destination showcase cruise conference in  
985 Porto in October. It was an opportunity to network and showcase Gibraltar as a cruise destination to UK Travel Agents. Madam Speaker, in April this year I attended the prestigious Seatrade Global in Miami together with the CEO of the Gibraltar Tourist Board.

This is a key show in the global cruising market with all the major cruise companies attending. We were able to have a number of very fruitful meetings and networking opportunities. We have  
990 seen an increase in port calls for Gibraltar for 2024 and 2025 and we will continue to work hard to push this sector further.

Madam Speaker, we co-hosted, together with Virgin Atlantic, an exclusive dinner in Southampton to yet another set of top level executives in May 2024 which included the likes of Royal Caribbean, Marella Cruises, Azamara Cruises, P&O, Celebrity Cruises and Norwegian, just to  
995 name a few. The attendee list was an impressive 'Who's who' of very senior members of the key cruise liners globally. It is not often that you get such high calibre executives in one room, and it is *excellent* exposure for Gibraltar.

It was also a great opportunity to invite them all to Gibraltar this coming September as Gibraltar has been selected as the host country for the prestigious CLIA Destination showcase in  
1000 September 2024. Holding this event in Gibraltar is a milestone. Around 80 of the top cruise agents and executives will be attending.

Madam Speaker, the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions segment (or MICE) as it's generally known, is a sector we are actively pursuing by positioning Gibraltar as an attractive hub for this market. In our continued and developing strategy to attract the MICE sector to the  
1005 destination, the Gibraltar Tourist Board attended various events last summer including the M&I Planner event in Limassol together with the Sunborn Hotel. This is an event to network with a whole range of MICE buyers from both UK and Europe and a total of 42 back-to-back meetings were held during the course of the two-day event. We returned again this January in Marrakech.

The Gibraltar Tourist Board also attended 'The Meetings Show' in London, the largest MICE  
1010 event in the UK with over 1,200 buyers attending. Key to the show's attraction for Gibraltar is that 97% of buyers are UK based. It is through participation at the Meetings Show that the GTB was able to meet the Business Travel Association (BTA), whose members are responsible for 95% of corporate travel in the UK.

1015 We are honoured to have been selected as the host country for their overseas conference in  
Gibraltar also this coming September. So we have a very busy September coming up on the  
tourism front. It is a great opportunity to proposition what Gibraltar can offer to this important  
and lucrative sector of the corporate tourism landscape. We also attended the MICEBOOK  
conference in January 2024, in London together with the Sunborn Hotel – this was the first time  
attending this MICE event in order to evaluate its benefits.

1020 Madam Speaker, the short-term let accommodation sector has been growing exponentially  
during the past few years in the global scene, and this includes in Gibraltar where from June to  
May 2022 to 2023 figures are up by a substantial 24%. This sector is a substantive issue facing  
most jurisdictions internationally and regionally and at different levels, and there is no standard  
global framework to be guided by. Every place is slightly different, and most regions are  
1025 implementing their own initiatives commensurate with the issues they are facing. While these  
short-term rental accommodations play a vital role in the tourism accommodation ecosystem,  
contributing to economic activity, there is an imperative need for regulation in this domain.

Madam Speaker, we are in the final stages of implementing this piece of legislation which will  
provide much-needed clarity and serve to legitimise the accommodation on offer in this sector.  
1030 Madam Speaker as with all other fronts in the tourism landscape, the Gibraltar Tourist Board will  
continue to engage with the travel industry, building relationships and pushing the Gibraltar  
agenda forward.

In June 2023 the Gibraltar Tourist Board attended the ITT Travel (Institute of Travel Tourism)  
conference in Qatar, attended by more than 200 senior representatives from the UK travel  
1035 industry, ranging from government bureaus to world-renowned airlines.

In September 2023 we attended the Global Travel Marketplace in London where the CEO  
Mr Kevin Bossino delivered a presentation on sustainable travel and was also part of a panel  
discussion together with senior representatives of the tourist boards of Italy, France and Portugal.  
The Global Travel Marketplace (GTM) is an appointment-only event that aims to connect top-  
1040 producing travel advisors with global travel suppliers.

This was followed by the Future of Travel conference in which we hosted a lunch at a  
prestigious Travel Weekly event in the Google London offices. The CEO of the Gibraltar Tourist  
Board delivered an address to members which included high-level executives of the Travel  
Industry in London. This event is attended by executives of the whole spectrum of the travel  
1045 industry including: Airlines, Cruise Lines, Travel Advisers, Travel Agents, consortiums, Media,  
Online Travel Agencies including Google itself.

In November 2023, I attended the World Travel Market (WTM) in London together with my  
team. This was my first time at the event and it was important to see how the event operated.  
WTM is considered to be one of the most influential travel and tourism events globally with over  
1050 40,000 travel professionals from 184 countries attending the event. It is crucial for Gibraltar as a  
destination to be represented to showcase what we have to offer.

In terms of cross-border tourism, we have engaged with the overland tour operators and have  
embarked on a marketing initiative on the TUI buses to promote awareness and visits. Every TUI  
customer that arrives to Costa del Sol and Costa de la Luz will see the Gibraltar Tour adverts during  
1055 their transfer and other excursions. In addition, we will continue to promote Gibraltar including  
any events and targeting these areas in particular.

On the subject of buses and overland travel, coach arrivals statistics are proving positive, with  
the first quarter of 2024 up by 18.5% from the first quarter of 2023. Land frontier visitor arrivals  
are up by 14.1% from 2022 to 2023, signalling growth in this coming year.

1060 Madam Speaker, the compact nature of our destination lends itself to the pursuit of special  
interest groups or niche markets. At the start of 2024 the Gibraltar Tourist Board attended the  
BOOT conference in Dusseldorf, one of the largest yacht and water sports shows globally. With  
214,000 visitors from 120 countries, it included representatives from the yachting world, marinas,  
water sports and scuba diving.

1065 It was Gibraltar's first time attending this show to ascertain potential value in the future. Scuba  
diving is a particular example of a special interest group with great potential which we are focusing  
on. Divers are constantly searching for new destinations and although competition is tough,  
Gibraltar has a superb scuba-diving environment. With 35 wrecks and reefs to explore and an  
abundance of marine life, it is an opportunity to position Gibraltar as the *perfect* diving  
1070 destination.

Due to this In March 2024 we attended the UK Dive Show in Coventry together with Dive  
Charter's dive centre group. This show is the UK's largest dive event and it was an opportunity to  
target dive Tour Operators, travel agents, consumers directly and to connect with Dive Centres.  
The UK is Gibraltar's key feeder market for this niche sport, and it is highly beneficial to have a  
1075 presence at this type of event. We made contact with one of the main dive agents and invited  
them for a familiarisation trip where she was able to absorb the diving scene in Gibraltar.

We have recently launched Gibraltar as a diving destination via the DiveWorldwide website  
offering packages for five-day trips to Gibraltar which I am convinced will be a success.

1080 Madam Speaker, the wedding sector is another of the niche markets we want to pursue  
further. Gibraltar is one of the most accessible and hassle-free global locations for couples to  
legally solemnise their union. The introduction of same sex marriage legislation in December 2016  
has also paved the way for LBGQTQ+ couples to benefit from this, increasing the numbers of  
potential weddings.

1085 Madame Speaker, our colleagues at the CSRO, working together with the Ministry of Culture  
are now, as already mentioned, using the City Hall as the main marriage registry. As part of this  
niche tourism strategy, in March the Gibraltar Tourist Board attended a Weddings & Honeymoons  
dinner awards event in London together with the CSRO and the Sunborn Hotel. The marketing  
initiative with the magazine included a video interview which allowed me to promote the virtues  
of weddings in Gibraltar on all their digital channels.

1090 Sporting events have also played a pivotal role in our event-led tourism strategy. The versatility  
of our locale allows for the hosting of various sports, presenting a valuable opportunity to  
consistently contribute to our overnight stay system through a diverse range of events. By actively  
engaging with sports groups both locally and internationally, we can cultivate a steady stream of  
events, enhancing the appeal of our destination promoting a dynamic atmosphere for both  
1095 participants and spectators alike.

We once again supported the Rugby 7s event which drew a huge crowd of international  
visitors. This is a good example of our tourism-led event strategy and unique in that it merges  
sports and finance.

1100 Madam Speaker, as traditionally is the case, in November we held the Gibunco Gibraltar  
International Literary Festival which was *hugely* successful. I would like to thank the Gibunco  
Group for their continued support as key sponsors of this event.

1105 This event saw very high-level personalities such as former UK Prime Minister Theresa May,  
Dame Mary Berry and Esme Young as well as other politicians, historians, children and other  
authors from a good variety of fields. We were also graced by the presence of the patron of the  
Literary Festival, HRH Princess Anne.

1110 Earlier in the year HRH had kindly agreed to continue her patronage for a further three years.  
We will continue to host this event, but given its success this year it will be a week-long event  
working closely with GCS and the Ministry of Culture. This year our local talent will present  
alongside international authors. Other than placing Gibraltar firmly on the map in terms of  
literature, it serves to promote the Rock to an influential and international audience.

As the event includes an educational school programme, our students are also engaged and  
exposed to varied literary talent.

1115 It is our commitment to increase our air connectivity so the Gibraltar Tourist Board attended  
the CONNECT Turin conference in February which is an Airline Route Development forum. The  
event hosted 800 participants and 80 airlines. The face-to-face meetings with key personnel from  
existing airline partners and potential new airlines afforded great networking opportunities.

Just this past June we attended a dinner in London with top executives of EasyJet, including their CEO. This was a great opportunity to continue building on the great relationship we already enjoy with the airline.

1120 Airport statistics show scheduled flights were up by 2.6% in 2023 vs 2022. Passenger arrivals and departures by air increased 6.2% in the same period. We want to continue this momentum.

In our endeavour to continue to engage with the UK press, part of our strategy is to enhance awareness with familiarisation trips from the UK. In April 2023 we hosted a press trip which resulted in really positive articles by the Mail on Sunday and the Daily Mail Scotland. Following  
1125 this we attended the TravMedia/IMM event in London, where we held 36 back-to-back meetings with influencers and members of the British travel media.

This was a great opportunity to promote awareness of Gibraltar and to make contacts for potential future familiarisation trips.

1130 Madam Speaker, at the beginning of the year we focused on a rebrand of Visit Gibraltar and this culminated with a launch on 4th April 2024. The rebrand goes beyond the change of logo which now features Gibraltar's rich history, diverse culture, the iconic Rock and impressive Nature Reserve. The rebrand shines a spotlight on Gibraltar's hidden beauties, its lesser known but equally significant venues and highlighting the unique value of Gibraltar's heritage and culture while celebrating our British identity with our Mediterranean lifestyle.

1135 Parallel to the rebrand, a Tourism Strategy 2024-2030 blueprint was developed in order to provide a roadmap and focus for the next few years. This is a working document which will be amended as and when circumstances change.

Madam Speaker, we also launched our new website which is more user friendly and up to date. We have also introduced an interesting initiative whereby 3D scans of some of our tourist sites  
1140 have been developed and posted on our website. These will serve a dual purpose.

Visitors, such as a wedding couples deciding on their wedding venue, can now view City Hall for example. It will also enable visitors to experience restricted sites such as Gorham's Cave which only allows 150 physical visitors annually.

1145 We have also scanned the Eisenhower bunker which is located in a data centre, as well as the Garrison Library. Visitors will be able to experience these sites in an immersive way by accessing the 3D scan which will also provide links to interesting facts and information. We will be looking at introducing more sites in the future.

As part of enhancing our accessibility programme we have developed BSL QR codes linked to videos for some of our key sights as well as the airport. They are included in the Visit Gibraltar  
1150 website and will be included on the sites themselves.

In order to further enhance our visitor experience we have introduced a Smart Guide app for people wanting to make their own way around Gibraltar. Our view is to celebrate our unique identity and with this in mind we are also featuring our very own *Llanito* doctor with short clips on bespoke and interesting aspects of our historical sites.

1155 In addition, we are in progress of introducing Macaque educational videos which will give people an entirely new insight into the interesting, behavioural aspects of our undoubtedly top tourist attraction. The intention is that these initiatives will enhance engagement of the website.

Madam Speaker, we have embarked on a marketing campaign in the UK, including television adverts, newspaper ads both in print and online, and radio commercials as well as an expanded  
1160 social media campaign. We are showcasing Gibraltar in a different light, with fresh new footage and photography which seeks to showcase the experiential and emotive side of life in Gibraltar.

As part of our marketing drive we are introducing what is generally known as 'Instagrammable areas' to entice people to take pictures and tag us in their social media. This is a free form of marketing and very much in line with today's 'selfie' habits. For example, we have introduced a  
1165 'Kiss Me' sign at Europa Point and this is proving to be extremely popular, more popular than we could ever have thought. Very popular with all demographics of tourists. We will continue to develop similar ideas, such as selfie stands, in other interesting locations.



1170 In April I attended the TravMedia Awards in London together with the CEO of the Gibraltar Tourist Board, Mr Kevin Bossino and Ms Tracey Poggio from Gibraltar Tourist Board London office. This event recognises outstanding achievements in travel journalism and 24 winners were celebrated.

Visit Gibraltar sponsored the Diversity Champion of the Year Award, which was a new prize introduced. Exposure at this event was priceless with all top travel media, influencers, journalists and PR professionals from the UK in attendance.

1175 Madam Speaker, in our efforts to increase the visitor experience, the Gibraltar Tourist Board, spearheaded by Ms Suyenne Perez Catania, embarked on a programme to refresh our tour licence guide certifications to ensure that anyone offering tours have an up-to-date certification. This is crucial to ensure that we maintain the standard and quality of tours offered.

1180 A tailor-made course for the Licence Guide Badge, including a customer care section, has been offered to A-level students studying Travel and Tourism at the Gibraltar College. The course covers a wide variety of topics and gives students the opportunity of obtaining an extra qualification which will benefit them when working within the tourism industry.

1185 Madam Speaker, we will continue to work with both our colleagues in the public sector and the private sector, to enhance the tourism experience and what is on offer in Gibraltar. There are a number of key ongoing projects such as the enhancement of the World War II tunnel experience, the introduction of a completely new and interesting tourist attraction with the Hollow Rock project in Devil's Tower Road, the amazing Northern Defences project already announced by my Colleague the Deputy Chief Minister, and the Mount to name a few.

1190 The Upper Rock Nature Reserve continues to be one of our most popular selling points. Minister Cortes went through the figures during his speech so I will not go through them in detail. But a reminder that visitors increased by 30% from 2022 and 2023 showing tourist interest in this area. The first quarter of 2024 has seen an increase of 25% so we are confident we may reach pre-pandemic figures by the end of the year – fingers crossed. We will continue to promote this and all our other sites.

1195 We cannot and will *not* sit still, we are *passionate* about our tourism industry and will strive to push our agenda forward with energy and ambition. Gibraltar deserves to be recognised as a top tourist destination.

1200 I do not know whether the Members Opposite may try to put a damper on our marketing efforts or not, and even our product; however there is no denying that we are fortunate to live in the jewel of the Mediterranean and the upward statistics prove that what we are doing is working.

Madam Speaker, I am sure you will be pleased to hear I am approaching the end of my first Budget Speech. I hope I have not bored you. And I must say this is my longest soliloquy I have ever delivered (*Interjection*) and I know it has been long! I must say I have enjoyed myself.

1205 It has been my absolute pleasure to be able to recount everything my Ministries have done and are committed to do in the future. I have a great team of people working in my Ministries and relevant departments. I hope they realise that I could not do any of this work without them.

1210 I thank my team at Employment led by Debbie Garcia; my team at GCS led by Seamus Byrne; my team at the GTB led by Kevin Bossino; my team at the Youth Service led by Mark Zammit; my team at Training led by Dylan Podesta; my team at the Gibraltar Airport led by Terence Lopez; my team at Bruces' Farm led by Carlos Banderas; my team at the SNDO led by Jenny Victory; and finally my team in Equality and my Ministry led by April Smart Devincenzi.

1215 Some I may see every day, others not as often, but I know they are all just as invested as I am in making all our ideas, initiatives and policies work and come to fruition for the good of our community. Thanks to all of them, but a special thank you to Monica Stevens and Nicole Cartwright who have the interesting task of dealing with me and sorting my life out on a daily basis.

Madam Speaker, I would like to end by thanking you and the parliament team and all my parliamentary colleagues for listening so patiently today and for your continued support in the discharge of my functions as a Member of this House and my attendant ministerial responsibilities.

1220 Thank you very much. (*Banging on desks*)

### Adjournment

1225 **Chief Minister (Hon. F R Picardo):** Well, Madam Speaker, after that remarkable performance can I invite the House to take a recess of 20 minutes and return at five o'clock.

**Madam Speaker:** We will recess for 20 minutes.

*The House recessed at 4.40 p.m. and resumed its sitting at 5.00 p.m.*

**Madam Speaker:** The Hon. A Sanchez.

1230 **Hon. A Sanchez:** Madam Speaker, I rise today to deliver my first Budget address. It is with great honour that I do so, and I take this opportunity to once again thank the people of Gibraltar for this great privilege.

1235 As I rise, I look around to see four women MPs in this Parliament. While this represents progress in representation from the past, our Parliament still ranks below global, and most certainly European averages, in terms of representing women and minorities. I am not prepared to participate in self-congratulatory fanfare on this issue for the sake of my party or any other party.

Madam Speaker, this is not good enough and it is with this that I say collectively we must do better. Yes, I firmly agree that women should not be used as mere photo opportunities. However, this is not what the Hon. the Leader of the Opposition said. And the hon. Lady knows that.

1240 The hon. Gentleman did not refer to her UN visit. His comment was about photo opportunities of all candidates. In any event, Madam Speaker, it is unclear how his comment could be taken to mean anything derogatory about women. Misrepresenting the facts in this way does a disservice to the Hon. Minister and indeed to all women. I repeat: collectively, we must do better.

1245 Madam Speaker, the theme of every Budget debate in this House for over 10 years has been whether the Government is borrowing too much money and whether, as a consequence, it is putting the future of our children and our children's children at risk. There might have been a doubt in 2014 as to whether the GSD Opposition was right in this criticism of the Government. But today, in 2024, there is no doubt that we were right and they were not.

1250 The majority of the people in the community today, in 2024, accept that the Government's handling of the public finances has been a total car crash and that the discourse of the Chief Minister, in particular, on this issue, is not one that you would expect from a leader that is politically honest. Madam Speaker, the extraordinarily comprehensive speeches of my friends, the Hon. the Leader of the Opposition and the Hon. Mr Clinton demonstrate that.

1255 A subsidiary but related issue, of course, to their management of public finances (*Interjection*) has been the Government's record on accountability and transparency. The Opposition's central complaint has been that they have been unable to hold the Government to account because this is a Government that has structured its finances behind an impenetrable web of companies or that it simply chooses to close the shutters on Opposition questions when they become too awkward for them. (**A Member:** Hear, hear.)

1260 Yes, we have more parliamentary sessions, but what is the point of that if we on this side of the House are not given the information we need to properly do our jobs on behalf of the people we serve?

Madam Speaker, the public outcry against the Budget measures has been widespread, dominating our screens, our phones and the streets of Gibraltar. There is no escaping it.

1265 The disconnect between this Government and most of our community is astounding. It is unsurprising that the people feel dissatisfied with this Government, when what they experience and what they hear from them does not match up.

The numbers, the estimates, the promises are way too rosy for the difficult reality that people feel on the ground. And when so many people are genuinely worried that Gibraltar is becoming a place for the rich, a place that they no longer recognise; and that those who need the support of the Government the most are neither represented nor reflected, many may argue that they are no longer the socialist party that they claim to be. Many may argue that they, Madam Speaker, are champagne socialists at best. *(Interjections)*

1275 This disconnect is alarmingly palpable but we do not have to say it, the people said it loud and clear on the day of the Hon. Chief Minister's Budget address. They chanted 'Fuera Picardo' outside No. 6 Convent Place; and his promised, but never delivered, glorious 'New Dawn', Madam Speaker, was nowhere to be found.

1280 No, I am not an economist or an accountant or a lawyer, but I do meet many constituents and the feedback that I get is that people do not trust politicians and their promises. This may reflect a more general international trend, too, where people feel disconnected and disenfranchised; where trust in long-standing institutions has been eroded; and where the system feels too many as being unfair.

1285 This is a dangerous breeding ground for populist anti-establishment narratives that undermine institutions and democracy. And the gaslighting that we have seen from this Government and the Chief Minister, in particular, does not help us locally. Because every time the Chief Minister acts in this House like a playground bully, using his right of reply to denigrate his opponents, trust in all of us is collectively affected.

1290 The Hon. the Chief Minister may have adopted a rather sanctimonious tone during his Budget address, pretending otherwise; but, Madam Speaker, after 13 years people have repeatedly witnessed this behaviour and have grown tired of it. No doubt he will do it again in this session in his right of reply because he acts, with respect to him and his office, like the political equivalent of the Terminator. But if he is not careful, absent a treaty, which I hope that he can secure, his legacy will be public finances in such a state that an army of economists, accountants and lawyers will not be able to disentangle or remedy.

1295 But I digress, Madam Speaker; I am returning to my point. We need a Parliament that mirrors our society. If we are to have a democracy in which people feel reflected, we need more women, more working-class Gibraltarians and other minorities to be present.

1300 We need measures that support these demographics so that they feel welcome here and they can overcome the hurdles that stand in their path; because we know what will happen if we do not step up to this challenge, and it is something that we should all be very concerned about. I hope that in the context of parliamentary or other legislative reform agenda we can deal with these issues by working collectively together for the common good, which is as it should be.

1305 It is with this in mind, at the forefront of my mind, that I will aim to keep my address simple, relevant and true because this would not be a state of the nation speech until it speaks to all of our nation and not just to the elites, Madam Speaker.

1310 One of the hurdles is the intolerable deficit in Gibraltar regarding parental leave and other measures, designed to distribute the responsibilities of care more equally in our society. Women continue to provide the vast majority of care in our homes to our children, the elderly and the most vulnerable. To do so, they continue to impose limitations on their careers, social lives and personal development.

1315 While it still remains part of our culture for women to be the pillars of our families and our communities, this represents an intolerable injustice that we need to transform, because every time a woman leaves a workforce because she cannot find or afford childcare, cannot work out a flexible arrangement with her employer or lacks access to equitable parental leave allowances, her family's income suffers and she imposes limitations on her own career and development.

This is particularly problematic in the private sector, where quality provisions are close to non-existent and welfare protections generally fail to live up to the standards of European democracies. So I cannot stress enough the urgency of transitioning to more equitable parental-leave policies, which also incorporate paternity leave into our legislation.

1320 We also need improved and better resourced childcare, elderly care and care for those with supported needs and disabilities. In 2019, the then Minister responsible for this crucial area of policy claimed that the consultation on this matter was at an advanced stage. This was over four years ago.

1325 When I recently enquired about this specific issue, we were informed that a working group has now been established and that active work is ongoing. But while they talk about policies that were implemented in most of Europe decades ago, we continue to fall further behind the developed world in this area.

1330 To eliminate gender equalities and stereotypes, we must progress beyond symbolic gestures. Our counterparts in modern democratic jurisdictions have advanced in this regard, while we lag behind. We must, Madam Speaker, walk the walk as well as talking the talk.

1335 And although I understand the Hon. Minister's point about high taxation in Scandinavian countries enabling advanced parental-leave programmes, I do not accept that Gibraltar's lower taxes justify our significant lag in this area of equality. This policy contradicts our core democratic and constitutional values of equality, that all citizens deserve equal opportunities and protection from discrimination.

1340 I am far from convinced that the current tax levels stand in the way of development in such a crucial area. Such a defeatist attitude does them, a so-called socialist party, no credit at all. Working families face increasing pressures and need expanded support networks to manage. So apart from the aforementioned parental leave provisions, it is imperative for the Government to advance provisions for free childcare for children under school age, and wraparound care services for school-age children in Gibraltar.

1345 Comprehensive childcare solutions are essential to meet the needs of working families. Yet the Government, which criticised us for emphasising the need for reviews and audits, continues to beat around the bush on this issue.

1350 Yes, Madam Speaker, to beat around the bush and talking the talk without walking the walk. Conducting feasibility studies – not reviews, feasibility studies – and setting up working groups on critical matters affecting people's everyday lives. This is a Government that has had 13 years to develop and implement these changes. This is a Government that campaigned on the slogan of 'We can get the job done'.

1355 It is often said, Madam Speaker, that when you are high on inspiration, you can get two weeks' worth of work done in 24 hours. Thirteen years, Madam Speaker. They have had 13 years to be able to walk the walk.

1360 Indeed, Madam Speaker, there is a significant human element that the numbers in this Budget Book fail to capture or reflect, and these are the number of individuals finding themselves with increasingly less in their pockets as they grapple to meet growing financial demands. This number, we fear, continues to rise.

1365 However, the markers of a successful life go beyond financial prosperity. They encompass having a comfortable, pleasant, healthy and happy living environment, a true measure of quality of life.

1370 While it may be tempting to believe that our perfect Gibraltar is untouched by such social issues, the reality is that many families and children are facing significant vulnerabilities. We are fortunate to have NGOs and dedicated individuals in our community who work tirelessly to provide support and assistance. Likewise, we are grateful for the committed professionals who go above and beyond in their roles, and I take this opportunity to thank them and all of our wonderful NGOs for their efforts.

1375 However, Madam Speaker, there are people out there who desperately need our help. Mental health, poverty, people living in appalling conditions and families who cannot cope. We need to

help these families overcome the challenges that make them vulnerable, support the children affected and ensure that all related teams and professionals have all the resources that they need. Because at the heart of this issue, Madam Speaker, are the children.

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Improving the quality of their home lives and family relationships leads to positive outcomes. An early intervention in these areas helps children and young people develop the skills that they need to live happy, healthy and meaningful lives, increasing the possibility of success in education and personal attainment, and supporting good mental health. A greater emphasis on this and holistic ways to achieve this, can prevent individuals from entering downward spirals of anti-social behaviour and recurring offending, which are difficult to break.

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With a sharp increase in juvenile convictions, I echo the words of the Hon. Minister for Justice in this House not long ago. Prevention is better than cure. Our young people are the most important stakeholders when talking about our future and we owe it to them to offer them all the opportunities that they deserve. Indeed, we owe it to them to support those who may have strayed, to find their way back to the opportunities that we all deserve. I urge the Government to finally develop a proactive and comprehensive strategy in this regard.

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Madam Speaker, following on from this, it is crucial to highlight the importance of drug and alcohol rehabilitation services and to emphasise the brilliant work that this team does. We must continuously assess patterns to develop the service to meet our community's needs. In the last session of Parliament, I requested figures for those attending the community-based programme and the numbers had risen from 158 in 2021, to 185 in 2023. Indeed, the hon. Member has confirmed in his Budget address an increase of 40%.

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Madam Speaker, although this signals a positive step in individuals' uptake of these programmes and their desire for rehabilitation, it also suggests an increasing need for rehabilitation due to drug and alcohol abuse or addiction issues. When I enquired about the increase and how the Government was assessing the matter, the Minister responded with some amusement, suggesting that if this was the total number of people with drug problems in Gibraltar, we were doing quite well.

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However, Madam Speaker, I am afraid that the Minister seems to trivialise the issue. These figures only refer to those on this particular community-based programme and do not include those in other programmes, such as the Bruce's Farm residential programme. They do not account for the many individuals who, for various reasons, may not be ready to access rehabilitation services, nor do they include figures for young people or those who may have sought rehabilitation services in another jurisdiction.

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In any event, Madam Speaker, this is not a matter of amusement and I take the opportunity to recognise the struggle and hardship endured by individuals facing addiction issues and indeed their families. I congratulate each and every individual who is on their rehabilitation journey, sending a strong message of support to them and also to those who are yet to embark on this journey. This is not a matter to be trivialised.

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Prevention is always better than cure and while it is imperative that the figures should be monitored to continue to boost and expand the programmes on offer, encourage the uptake and eliminate any stigma associated with these programmes, the Government should also build on the work within the community to remind people, especially young people, of the health implications of drug, alcohol and substance abuse.

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Madam Speaker, I would like to move on to the crucial matter of mental health because there is no good health without good mental health, and I am sure that on this we can all agree. We all accept that there needs to be financial controls. That is not in doubt, but we should not ignore the recommendations of the Mental Health Board in their latest annual report 2023.

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Those who oversee this service and are most familiar with its intricacies lack the authority to effectively allocate financial and human resources, albeit within an agreed budget. No one is suggesting that those that oversee the service should be able to spend what they want, but for the service to operate efficiently and flourish those directly involved need significant input into budget utilisation.

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1420 Whilst there have been improvements in mental health services, Madam Speaker, it remains true that too many individuals continue to fall through the cracks, struggling to cope without receiving necessary support. Many rely heavily on their families, who often find themselves overwhelmed, and much more needs to be done to provide housing and care for individuals with chronic mental health issues to maintain periods of stability. Because, without adequate support  
1425 during these crucial periods, individuals often find themselves in cycles of readmission or involuntary commitment.

Madam Speaker, we still hear far too many concerns about the availability of mental health nurses during critical moments, long waiting lists to see child psychologists and the need to revise crisis protocols for children, amongst a litany of other issues.

1430 I have to stress that I am deeply concerned by the findings of the Mental Health Board annual report, particularly regarding the critical need for additional resources. It is alarming that there appears to be no budget allocated for the furnishing of supported living flats, forcing the housing outreach to rely on charities and goodwill for furniture.

1435 Madam Speaker, a progressive healthcare vision emphasises treating more patients within the community, but this requires adequate Government budgeting and investment. Depending on charities and goodwill for essential furnishing introduces unnecessary unpredictability into this vital service.

1440 But what particularly alarmed me from in the report is the situation at Sandpits House, where subcontracted personnel face challenges in managing mental health situations and medication issues due to lack of training. This is unacceptable.

When the Government subcontracts Health and Care services, it has a duty to ensure that all staff are properly trained and equipped to handle such critical situations. Anything less risks preventable errors and we must learn from tragic past experiences. The question is, Madam Speaker, *when* will they learn?

1445 There is a concerning lack of clarity from the Hon. Minister for Health and Care regarding crucial issues, often leading to contradictions. While she affirms a strict level of training for all subcontracted staff, her statements reveal significant gaps. In answers to questions in this House, the Minister stated, and I quote:

The ERS contracts are already in place and, to my knowledge, they do not contain any provisions in relation to training, so there is no requirement to monitor them. Therefore, I cannot answer that question because it doesn't exist. In relation to the Care Agency sites, the contract that is out in relation to respite, no contract exists there so there is no standard as to training, so there is no requirement to monitor training at present.

1450 This current state of affairs leaves service users and their families grappling with uncertainty, as there is minimal assurance regarding the standard and oversight of training moving forward. Addressing such critical areas is of paramount significance, and I urge the Hon. Minister to establish a mechanism that not only ensures the competence of trained personnel, but also ensures continuous oversight of this training across all services provided to the Government and its agencies by subcontracted entities.

1455 Madam Speaker, the prevailing circumstances underscore the imperative for independent oversight and regulation of the services rendered. While acknowledging the logistical challenges posed by our nation's scale, there does nonetheless exist a compelling rationale and urgent necessity to institute a tailored, locally adapted equivalent of a Care Quality Commission to ensure autonomous oversight and regulation over Health and Care services.

1460 This remit should encompass all such services regardless of their provider, be it governmental or private entities.

Furthermore, Madam Speaker, the evident absence of a framework to identify and rectify inefficiencies within Health and Care services transcends mere concerns of resource quantity and service quality. It strikes at the heart of resource utilisation.

1465 Who, I ask, systematically evaluates and addresses inefficiencies? Who relocates these resources to optimise patient care and service delivery? Regrettably, the reality appears to be

devoid of an independent mechanism for such tasks, leading to the squandering of these resources.

1470 We urgently require an independent mechanism to oversee and regulate all facets of these issues. The Hon. Minister, Madam Speaker, knows that the GMRB does not equate to this.

Madam Speaker, I must emphasise that constituency work stands as one of the most significant aspects of my role consuming a substantial portion of my time. It is crucial to highlight that constituents express a profound concern over the Government's lack of clarity regarding Health and Care services.

1475 The Hon. Minister fails to provide lucid responses regarding whether the proliferation of subcontracted companies will be restrained or who will assume responsibility for regulating and monitoring crucial elements of the service. Indeed, some have raised apprehensions that this may be the beginning of privatisation by stealth. Only time will tell.

1480 Furthermore, Madam Speaker, the proposed integration of the Care Agency into the GHA has sparked widespread confusion and concern. And despite assurances of ongoing consultation from the Minister, feedback from those affected indicates that crucial information fails to reach heads of service, staff and even union representatives.

1485 Feedback that we receive, Madam Speaker, is that the integration is happening *sí o sí*, but the current decision to contemplate integrating the Care Agency into the GHA and incorporating its CEO into the board has raised concerns by those on the coalface providing services which the Government needs to take into account.

Additionally, the announcement just last week of the award of a tender for domiciliary care services and home support raise much more questions than answers, in respect of which there will need to be much more clarification in the future.

1490 Madam Speaker, when I embarked on my journey to seek election and subsequently earned the honour of serving, I pledged to champion a brand of politics deeply attuned with the everyday struggles faced by ordinary citizens and I am committed to listening to and advocating for working mothers, fathers, individuals and families grappling with the mounting pressures of life in these uncertain times.

1495 Engaging with constituents stands as a cornerstone of my responsibilities and it is disconcerting to note that even in the aftermath of an election, the volume of concerns continue to flood our offices and they escalate. One might have anticipated a sense of optimism post-election. Yet the prevailing reality reveals a populace still beset by dissatisfaction and no amount of self-congratulatory gestures or superficial spin can obscure that undeniable truth.

1500 Because, as I said at the outset of my speech, a shroud of opacity envelops some of the actions of this Administration. When we seek clarity through questioning, the responses from certain Ministers fall short of acceptability.

1505 Take, for instance, the case of an individual holding the position of Finance Director for the Care Agency and concurrently serving as Finance and Procurement Adviser to the Ministry of Health. Each role compensated separately to the tune of approximately £160,000, along with an accommodation allowance, too. When I pressed for information regarding the public advertisement of these positions, I was met with evasive responses.

1510 Furthermore, Madam Speaker, the lack of transparency extends to the cost to the taxpayer of advisory roles, such as the forthcoming role directly assigned by the Health Minister to the Chairperson of the GHA once they relinquish that position and assume this advisory role. Despite repeated inquiries, clear answers remain elusive and the burden on the taxpayer mounts further with unadvertised advisory positions exemplified by the Education and Training Policy Adviser post outlined in the Government's draft estimates for 2024-25, commanding a staggering annual rate of £139,886.

1515 There is a well-known phrase once said by the former Chief Secretary, 'Civil servants must do more for less'.

But, Madam Speaker, it seems that the interpretation of this so-called Socialist Government is that those at the lower end of the pay scales, both in the private and public sectors, will have to

1520 continue to do more for less, while the Government evidently continues to boost the pay packages of those at the very top. It is no surprise, then, Madam Speaker, that this is a Government that continues to fail to find a proper, sustainable and fair way to distribute pay increments for low-income earners. Instead, they prefer to resort to poorly distributed handouts that mean little in the face of continued utilities increases, social insurance increases and cost-of-living issues that affects those on lower and modest income the most.

1525 Madam Speaker, these instances compound concerns, particularly when juxtaposed with a Government reliant on the goodwill and contributions of charities to furnish supported living accommodations. Similarly, the utilisation of the ERS Donation Fund to procure hampers for Government officials brushed aside by the implicated Minister as *Sálvame* politics is deeply troubling. The public has a rightful expectation to be informed about the allocation of the funds they donate, especially when their intended purpose comes under scrutiny.

1530 Furthermore, when queried about whether all the hampers had been accounted for and declared in accordance with Government directives, the Minister failed to furnish a coherent response. What measures have been taken to investigate this matter fully? Has the circa £2,500 expended been reimbursed back to the fund?

1535 This persistent lack of transparency, whether in minor or more substantial concerns, remains a prevailing theme in their governance.

Madam Speaker, if the Government seeks an example of *Sálvame*-style politics, we need not look far. The Chief Minister's record-breaking U-turn on the pollution levy, just hours after the Budget announcement, driven by a *massive* public outcry, illustrates the Government's approach to policy development.

1540 This policy was not announced with exemptions for young people, those on lower incomes or the elderly in our society, as one would have expected from a true socialist party. Instead, it was hastily introduced and then embarrassingly retracted due to backlash on social media and from the press.

1545 This is emblematic of how this Administration operates. Politics driven by social media and public sentiment rather than thoughtful policymaking. Politics à la Facebook, politics à la speak freely, Madam Speaker.

I now turn to another area within my responsibility. The area of disability. The inability to establish a transparent, inclusive and equitable process regarding disability benefit applications is deeply concerning. It reflects a pressing need for procedural enhancements to ensure accountability, transparency and fairness in all our endeavours.

1550 This transcends political rhetoric. It is about safeguarding the trust and confidence of those we serve. Regrettably, the qualifying criteria for disability benefits remains undisclosed. It remains a mystery, Madam Speaker. Inaccessible to those in need prior to submitting the applications.

1555 This lack of transparency not only hinders applicants' ability to gauge their eligibility but also obscures whether the criteria is consistently applied or systematic disparities exist.

The statistics provided in response to questions paint a troubling picture. In 2019, 44.44% of disability benefit applications were disallowed. By 2022, this figure rose to 50.57%. Taking the average from 2019 to 2023, a total of 42.16% of all applications were disallowed.

1560 But, Madam Speaker, how do applicants know whether the refusal is justified or not when we do not know the criteria for granting disability benefits? You do not need to be a lawyer – and there are enough of those in this place – to conclude that this offends against principles of natural justice.

1565 Madam Speaker, the reluctance to disclose and provide public access to the criteria for disability benefits cannot be justified by the assumption that all applicants are inclined to exploit the system. Such a premise unfairly deprives genuine cases of information that they are entitled to. It is the Government's duty to prevent abuse but they must do so without resorting to withholding crucial information, especially when this information is available in other jurisdictions.



1570 Furthermore, Madam Speaker, the overwhelming volume of concerns regarding the extensive waiting times for these applications is deeply troubling. This benefit is designed to aid and support individuals genuinely in need, and the persistent delays are intolerable.

1575 Madam Speaker, none of this is helped by the failure of the Government to fulfil the commitments made years ago. It is imperative to move forward in the extension of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. These legislative changes hold profound significance. Every parliamentary term the Government gives assurances and every parliamentary term ends with the Government failing to honour them.

1580 Now, Madam Speaker, I wish to address the escalating demand for services, provisions and support for individuals with supported educational needs within our community. This demand continues to surge and it is evident, Madam Speaker, that this area transcends politics, for me. It is extremely close to my heart; but I shall not delve into this for fear that if I do Hon. Ministers or party activists might indeed chastise me for it again.

Citing from the Government's commissioned review on factors contributing to the heightened prevalence of SEN in Gibraltar, it is evident, Madam Speaker, that multiple factors likely underpin the surge. The report explicitly states that no single cause can wholly explain this phenomenon.

1585 Undoubtedly, Madam Speaker, heightened awareness among both the public and professionals, particularly regarding conditions such as ASD, ADHD and developmental delays coupled with improved identification, screening and diagnostic tools, as well as reduced stigma, are critical contributors to this trend. However, Madam Speaker, it is essential to acknowledge that the same Government report underscores professionals' beliefs in a genuine increase in severe cases, especially those of ASD, that were previously unlikely to be overlooked.

1590 When we voiced the concerns of our constituents, Madam Speaker, particularly of individuals and families grappling with inadequate support, we do so not to discredit the progress that has been made but with a firm understanding that more comprehensive measures are imperative.

1595 We cannot ignore the plight of children with significant communication impediments, receiving minimal or no speech therapy due to strained services. Nor can we overlook the scarcity of available occupational therapy for those in need. **(A Member: Hear, hear.)**

1600 The protracted waiting list for ADHD assessments also remain a pressing concern, among a litany of other issues. Concerns have been expressed to me of parents and adults with ADHD having to go to Spain to be seen by doctors there because of waiting lists or because only the Hospital pharmacy dispenses Ritalin or other ADHD medication.

1605 Madam Speaker, we cannot ignore the fact that the Mental Health Board's annual inspection report further accentuates critical deficiencies, including the scarcity of local behavioural specialists, child psychiatrists, ambiguity in the ADHD referral process and the absence of the established ADHD pathways. Moreover, it delineates concerning waiting lists for children requiring psychological assessments and underscores the imperative of reviewing crisis protocols for children in acute situations.

1610 While debates may ensue regarding the reasons behind this surge, it is evident that the crux of the matter lies in the need to have proactive strategies to address these challenges. Despite potential attempts to deflect by arguing over the reasons, the urgency remains in addressing substantive concerns such as capacity issues at St Martin's School, the pressing need for a new St Bernadette Centre and the persistent issues stemming from fragmented care and inadequate regulation of subcontracted health and care providers.

1615 Madam Speaker, this underscores the imperative of continually bringing these pressing matters to this House, for they persistently resonate within our community and it is our duty to voice the concerns of our constituents and to hold the Government accountable.

And, if certain Hon. Ministers across the aisle prefer to engage in debates over historical actions, rather than focusing on the pressing realities faced by our community today, that is a matter for their conscience.

1620 As for myself, Madam Speaker, I shall steadfastly remain committed to addressing the present day challenges confronting our community and striving to implement solutions that serve the needs of today, tomorrow and our future generations.

I take this opportunity to thank you, Madam Speaker, the Clerk and the parliamentary team and the people of Gibraltar once again. Thank you. (*Banging on desks*)

1625 **Madam Speaker:** The Hon. G Origo.

**Hon. G Origo:** Madam Speaker, hon. colleagues, Hon Ministers opposite and to all watching from home, it is an absolute privilege to rise and to deliver my first ever Budget address to this House. My contribution will cover each of my shadow portfolios, that is Youth, Tourism and Heritage, the Environment and Equalities. But before I turn to my contributions, I feel it is appropriate to take a moment to express my gratitude to the parliamentary team working here, for all the hard work that you do and for assisting Members of Parliament of this House. Your warm welcome and guidance has been very much appreciated and for that I thank you all.

1630 For the first part of my contribution, I wanted to talk about the youth of Gibraltar. As the youngest elected MP, and one of the youngest ever, it dawned on me how little has been done for youth to be engaged with our local politics. As such, I wanted to start my address with why it is important for youth to be politically engaged.

1640 The reason for this, critically speaking, is that it is a consensus worldwide that in order for political systems to be representative, all parts of society must be involved in the decision-making processes, and that includes our young people. Interestingly, however, according to recent data, around half of the world's population is under 30, yet statistically only 3% of elected MPs globally are under 30 and represent this age group.

1645 In respect of our own elections and statistics, it showed that the under-20s and the 20- to 30-year-olds were the lowest to turn out and vote. So what does this tell us? Well, it appears that young people are disengaged with our local politics also. That has to change for the good and benefit of their future.

1650 But is it their fault? I do not think so. Because why would they be engaged? There is evidently a loss of interest from our youth. They might be thinking, is anything really ever going to change in the way that things are done? Can we blame them?

Gibraltar has been riddled with scandals, some having made the international press, with the latest two unfolding only recently in the form of the Auditor's Report and the McGrail Inquiry.

Have young people lost trust in politicians and by default politics? Quite possibly. Do we understand the damage this is doing? So what do we do?

1655 Well, we need to inspire them. We need to give them hope. We need to earn their trust again. That is, if we wish to retain their engagement. I, for one, think it is important to do so. Not least because our youth are the heartbeat of Gibraltar. Their energy, creativity and potential are the future. It is our collective responsibility to ensure and provide the best future that we can for them.

1660 Moving now to the transition of our youth between education and employment. It must be said that whilst we have invested in education, we recognise however that there are still other challenges faced by our youth, particularly within the job market. To address this, we must expand vocational training programmes, increase partnerships with local businesses to provide more apprenticeships and more internships to young people.

1665 We should also bring back the Careers Fair, so that students at a young age can start to think about what they would like to do in the future. I understand that in his address on Tuesday, the Hon. Minister for Education confirmed that he hoped to bring this event back in the new academic year, and that is very much welcomed.

These initiatives must be designed to bridge the gap between education and employment, ensuring our young people are equipped with the skills and experience needed to thrive in our

1670 local job sectors. On this, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the fact that the Hon. Minister has, since elected, been trying his utmost best, particularly in these areas.

The PATHS programme, designed to empower and upskill individuals, aims to create a more inclusive and resilient workforce. It particularly focuses on those transitioning from supported employment, prison or undergoing rehabilitation. All that said, while the programme's intentions are commendable, the execution, however, appears to have significant shortcomings, as evidenced by recent parliamentary discussions.

The primary goal of PATHS is to provide individuals with the necessary skills to improve their employability and independence. However the low enrolment figures of only 29 individuals since its inception, evidence there is a significant gap between the programme's goals and its outreach. The Government's inability to predict the number of expected enrolees suggests a clear lack of planning and understanding of the target demographic. The low enrolment numbers may also reflect inadequate engagement strategies.

With that said, the PATHS programme does have a noble vision of integrating marginalised groups into mainstream workforce and it is very much hoped that there is indeed an uptake in those individuals who sign up to it.

The ZONE: Step Up and Thrive project, another recent Government initiative, is aimed at addressing the needs of young people who are not in education, not in employment or not in training, referred to as NEETs. The project's primary focus is to support and offer guidance to these individuals by providing a drop-in service where they can seek advice.

However, the operational hours of this service, very notably, is limited to a mere 90 minutes a week, specifically from 12.30 to two o'clock on every Thursday. This restricted availability raises critical questions about the effectiveness and sincerity of this initiative, described by the Minister as a beacon of hope for young people. However, the limited timeframe for the drop-in service starkly contrasts with this grandiose description.

The narrow window significantly undermines the project's potential impact. The effectiveness of any support service is heavily reliant on its accessibility, therefore the stringent time restriction of this drop-in service raises several issues.

Additionally, it is evident that to offer meaningful support and guidance requires time. A limited session once a week cannot possibly provide sufficient time to address the complex issues commonly faced by NEETs, such as mental health challenges, skills gap, social and economic barriers. The restricted accessibility will no doubt also have an impact on the continuity, consistency and most importantly the quality of the care, support and guidance that is provided and offered to those people who are not in education, not in employment and not in training.

So the project, Madam Speaker, while well-intentioned, currently falls short of its potential due to its inaccessibility and engagement. For it to truly serve as a beacon of hope for young people, the Government needs to demonstrate a more substantial commitment through extended hours, comprehensive services and effective outreach.

Because 90 minutes a week cannot possibly be the level of commitment issues such as these deserve. Only then can this initiative make a meaningful difference in the lives of NEETs and fulfil its promise of helping them to step up and thrive.

In terms of employment, it is only recently that efforts have been made in this respect. The youth have been massively unaware of the types of jobs available to them in the private sector or of the skillsets required for these roles.

So despite recent efforts made by Government, such as the new Connect Hub – which has yet to get traction – regrettably young people still feel that there is a lack of opportunity after leaving school at the age of 16, especially those who do not follow an academic career path. Many in fact find themselves unemployed for large periods of time while struggling to find a job and that has implications, both financially and emotionally.

And although the Government may boast about having an average of 29 individuals per quarter registered as unemployed, we ask what about those who do not have meaningful employment? What about those on zero-hour contracts? What about those who are moved from placement to

placement to placement in the Government's Future Job Strategy? What about those people who have no real prospect of a meaningful career? What is the Government going to do about them?

1725 Madam Speaker, because for those young people who spend long periods of time in unemployment or those who do not have meaningful employment, what often occurs is that they tend to resort to illicit activity. To support this, I refer to the most recent available data on youth crime taken from the RGP reports of 2021, which showed that in the last three years leading up to COVID, the RGP made 600 arrests in relation to youth crime, representing an average of 200 youths arrested each year; or one every other day.

1730 The majority of which related to thefts, burglaries, substance abuse, violence, vandalism and damage to property. Worrying still is the fact that according to the latest policing plan of 2023-24, the age group most arrested between 2022-23 were 18-year-olds; in 2023-24, the most frequently arrested age group were those within their 30s.

1735 We ask ourselves: would statistics be this concerning if young people had meaningful employment? So should these worrying statistics on youth crime come as a surprise to anyone? I would not think so. Not to me at least, because from my shadow portfolios youths are by far the area that least money is spent on.

1740 Putting to one side the costs of health care and education of course, we can see that £1.2 million was spent on equality; £1.9 million on heritage; a further £2 million spent on tourism; £6.8 million was spent on the Upper Rock, tourist sites and beaches; a massive £12 million on the collection and disposal of refuse; and a further £18.5 million on the environment.

In our youth, however, we only invested a mere £690,000.

1745 For the sake of our youth, we would like to see much more investment and expenditure in this area, particularly in education and training, should the Government be serious about wanting to provide beacons of hope and opportunity for young people. But whether we are able to provide for a better future for our youth and what such a future would look like very much depends on whether we manage to secure a safe and beneficial agreement.

1750 A treaty that we would hope will not cross any of our red lines, but yet one which is safe and beneficial for all the people of Gibraltar. To that I wish to bid you all good luck, because the people of Gibraltar have entrusted you with that responsibility for their sake and the sake of all Gibraltarians.

1755 Turning now to tourism, Madam Speaker, it must be noted that in terms of the data forming part of the tourism statistics, it has been raised before in this House, and I concur with those comments that the statistics are not as up to date as they could or should be, with some lagging behind many months. This is not particularly helpful when coming to assess whether the Budget Book of this year indeed represents good value for money to the taxpayer.

1760 With a view to being as constructive as possible, I note that having data which is more up to date would no doubt be useful. Nevertheless, we can see from the available data on tourist numbers that the total number of Upper Rock Nature Reserve visitors has experienced steady improvements. According to data provided by the Department of Environment on its website as at the end of 2023 the Upper Rock hosted a total of roughly 750,000 visitors, just 290,000 people less than our pre-COVID tourist levels.

1765 Therefore, although tourist site receipts may be on the rise when compared to last year's statistics, it is notable that we are not quite at pre-COVID levels yet. Whilst there is evidently still a lot of work to do, the latest figures for January 2024 do show a new record for the total number of visits to the nature reserve for a single January month, and we therefore hope – and I mean *hope* – that this trajectory continues and perhaps we may finally see again some normality when it comes to tourist visitor numbers in the Upper Rock.

1770 In terms of the number of cruise passengers and crew arrival by month, referring to the latest statistics as of April 2024, the total number of passengers stood at 55,380. However, in the same period the year before, the number of cruise passenger visitors on the same date stood at 63,616, reflecting a 13% drop in the number of visitors coming in.

1775 Similarly, in terms of the number of cruise liner arrivals to Gibraltar, this too has seen a drop of roughly 10% in the period between January to April of 2024 when compared to that of last year's. Because as at the first quarter of this year, we had only seen seven cruise ships arrive to Gibraltar. One in January, one in February and five in March. Whereas in the same period the previous year, we had already seen 18 cruises calling into our port.

1780 The economic impact that each cruise call has on our economy cannot be understated. Every vessel and the thousands of passengers that they bring provide a huge boost to our catering and our commercial retail sectors, and therefore we need to enhance our efforts in attracting cruisers and ultimately passengers, who will then in turn be spending money in Gibraltar.

1785 The number of coaches arriving via the land frontier appears to have improved significantly from last year's datasets, showing a total number of 3,993 coaches arriving to Gibraltar as at 31st December 2023. Whilst the improvement in this area is welcomed, it must be noted that the current levels are only 60% of what they used to be in 2019; 60% less, or almost half of the number of coaches that we used to enjoy. Evidently there is room for significant improvements in this respect.

1790 The number of tourists arriving via the land frontier stands at £8,795,000 as of December 2023, according to the data provided by the Borders and Coastguard Agency. This figure however equates to 2 million people less, or 20% less, than our pre-COVID levels. In fact, the last time we had this low level number of visitors was all the way back in 2007.

But much like the Hon. Chief Minister said in his address on Monday, we are not quite in the good times yet. And I agree; not quite.

1795 Finally, the number of flight arrivals to and from Gibraltar, together with the number of passengers it brings, has remained quite static over the last couple of years. So, whilst there have been improvements to the number of visitors arriving, compared to last year, they are not quite like what they used to be.

1800 We are therefore yet to see the results of the sports-led and the entertainment-led tourism which this Government promised to attract if re-elected. Instead, the Government lead with initiatives such as the introduction of selfie sticks in Europa Point, and in other locations of course; but specifically the one at Europa Point with a backdrop showing up untreated sewage spewing into the oceans. *(Interjections)* The Government then wonders why the millions of tourists it hoped would flock to Gibraltar have not yet arrived.

1805 Regrettably in terms of attracting new visitors and enhancing the experience on the Upper Rock, it is noted that the Cruise Terminal remains in an embarrassing state of decay. **(A Member: Hear, hear.)** And whilst it is appreciated that a new commitment to invest in the cruise port has been made, which will no doubt improve the tourist experience, more could nevertheless be done to enhance the visitor experience when disembarking off the cruises and navigating their way to town. **(A Member: Hear, hear.)**

1810 Simply because, Madam Speaker, what an experience it must be for those who come to visit Gibraltar, many for the first time. Arriving at our port in one of these magnificent vessels, what an experience it must be to make your journey on foot towards the Grand Casemate Square for your unforgettable Gibraltar visit, if only you manage to find your way there. *(Laughter)*

1815 Because our western arm, where these passengers disembark from, is unsightly, lacking proper signage and beautification whilst largely surrounded by piecemeal architectural designs. For instance, these tourists are treated to our wonderful multimillion pound bicycle lane which has remained unfinished for quite some time now and regrettably leads nowhere.

1820 The journey to and from the Port is quite frankly not designed to give a positive or lasting impression to these visitors. Only to arrive at Casemate Square to witness a massive centrepiece of a clock which is broken or for large parts of the year under repair. Madam Speaker, much like a broken clock this Government is only right just two times a day *(Laughter)* and predictably on this occasion they have got it wrong.

1825 As previously said before in this House by my hon. colleague to my right, Mr Bossino, there needs to be a strategy which recognises that tourism and the money it brings is crucially important to our economy. In our view, focus should be on the product and of course the tourist experience.

Because whilst the majority of the touristic experience is left to the private sector to provide, the Government is responsible for most of the product. That includes our heritage sites, our nature reserve, our beaches, our town, our roads and our entry and access points.

1830 Improving and further investing in these areas will no doubt go a long way to enhancing the visitor experience in Gibraltar and in turn leave more money in our coffers.

Madam Speaker, if I may briefly refer you to and quote from the latest Chamber of Commerce Tourism Manifesto 2024. It appears as follows:

Looking at the statistical record of the number of visitors along with the average spend per visitor we can see that Gibraltar's tourism sector is at best, static or in decline. What is more alarming is that the average spend per visitor has hardly grown in the last decade. We recognise that Gibraltar is largely a day trip destination rather than a place to come and stay. However, unless we can grow the number of day visitor markets and attract more visitors to come and stay, Gibraltar's tourism sector will see little or no growth and there will be little increase in the average spend per visitor.

It continues:

For several years, the Chamber has advocated that far greater attention and investment be given to the tourism sector in Gibraltar. [And] Despite successive Governments making some progress in different areas of the tourism product, it remains the Chamber's view that there has been no long-term strategy and an underwhelming lack of ambition to pursue an exciting and committed approach to a sector which offers considerable but yet unrealised potential.

1835 In order to unlock that unrealised potential, improving our transport connectivity for tourism will be vital in attracting and being able to manage the increased visitor numbers. Expanding the visitor experience to include more sites across Gibraltar, the report says, rather than concentrating visitors in the Upper Rock, would go some way to help alleviate part of the congestion created by large influxes of people in the nature reserve.

1840 In this respect, it is pleasing to see the Minister's initiative on the alternative tour, which will no doubt put into focus some of the heritage sites which are located on the south side of Gibraltar, which if done correctly could go some way to alleviating the pressures experienced at times in the Upper Rock. And that is very much welcomed.

1845 That said, equally welcome would be for major improvements to those sites which a tour proposes to take the visitors to, if what we want is for them to have a worthwhile experience and to spend money in Gibraltar. Because, Madam Speaker, whilst all those changes are well and good, in light of the previous visitor statistics it must be noted that it is also equally important, if not more, to bring tourists to Gibraltar and improve on those numbers, because tourists are the ones who will then in turn spend money on our economy.

1850 Which brings me neatly to my next point, which are the hotels sleeping capacity. On this, it is noticeable that despite improvements with the opening of the Sunborn and the Holiday Inn, the current complement of hotels are insufficient to meet potential demands. Data has shown that as bed numbers increase so does the percentage of occupancy. So more beds equals more overnight stays.

1855 However, with the closure of the Queen's, Continental and Caleta hotels, the number of available beds is now the same as it was 20 years ago. This shortage of beds undoubtedly limits our ability to attract more visitors, who in turn will spend more money during their stay in Gibraltar. Therefore, as part of its tourism manifesto wish list, the Chamber of Commerce call on the Government to commit to increasing the number of beds available from the current 650 to 1,500 over the next decade.

1860 However, Madam Speaker, it is appreciated that hotel owners will only invest if it is evident that there will be a considerable number of flights coming into Gibraltar from a variety of different

destinations, so that they can be confident that the demand for these additional beds exists. Attracting new airlines and new routes should therefore be co-ordinated with investments in hotel infrastructure.

1865 Moving away from beds and looking now at flights, it must be said that since the investment was made into the development of the new Kingsway Tunnel, we have yet to maximise the benefits of such a project by failing to expand Gibraltar's flight networks into other territories.

1870 It is evident from the statistics, Madam Speaker, that business has not yet picked up and reached the levels that they used to be, pre-pandemic. With 72,332 arrivals at our hotels in 2023, this represents a 22% decrease from the 92,000 people we had visit in 2019.

Part of the issue, we understand, in terms of the hotel industry, relates to the increase in the number of short lets on the market, which places unfair competition our hotels. I understand that in this respect the Government is proposing to introduce legislation to regulate short lets and we look forward to the opportunity to review and consider the draft legislation once published.

1875 The other cause for the downturn is evidently the drop in the volume of flights and the subsequent number of people arriving to Gibraltar as a result. It is hoped therefore that efforts are redoubled to attract new airlines and flight destinations to Gibraltar, which will no doubt boost our local economy.

1880 Madam Speaker, in terms of tourist mobility, it has been reported that with the current complement of our tour bus fleet available, Gibraltar has a capacity to transport around 1,300 people, with an additional 700 seats made-up from the taxi fleet, meaning that we could at best transport roughly 2,000 people around Gibraltar at any given time. With millions of people arriving via the land frontier, hundreds of thousands via plane and hundreds of thousands arriving via cruise ships each year, we say it is practically impossible to provide the transport services required to cater for these visitors without disappointing a very large number of them.

1885 The fact is that a major limitation of the existing bus network is that it is not tailored for tourists. There are no multilingual guides to explain our history and the stops are not always at the most convenient locations for tourist sites.

1890 Additionally, the current bus network does not allow visitors to access the Upper Rock Nature Reserve, a major tourist attraction. So while the existing bus network is adequate for local use, it is not user-friendly for tourist visitors. We must be doing more to provide for an unforgettable and pleasant experience for those tourists arriving to Gibraltar. That is, if we want the tourism industry to flourish and to grow as one of the strongest pillars of our economy.

1895 To summarise, Gibraltar's tourism statistics look bleak and somewhat worrying, to say the least. We would have hoped that by this stage, a few years out of the pandemic, that we would have attained normality when it comes to tourist numbers.

1900 That said, at the same time we evidently cannot manage increased visitor numbers without redesigning the transportation system. This redesign needs to address the movement of people from the border and the Cruise Terminal to the town, and from the town to the Upper Rock and to the tourist sites around Gibraltar. May we strongly suggest that a considerable amount of time, effort and resources are spent in these areas.

1905 Because whilst we may have seen an increase in tourism expenditure of 23.5% – as was noted earlier this week – when compared to the previous year, according to the latest data on the Tourist Survey Report 2023 it is noticeable that this figure is £50 million less per year than what we used to enjoy pre-COVID, which saw tourist expenditure in Gibraltar rising to a record £307 million.

1910 With that said, we must ensure that tourism growth is sustainable. Our focus should be on developing eco-tourism, cultural tourism, tourism that is sports-led, events-led. This will in turn attract visitors who respect and appreciate our natural environment and of course our heritage. By doing so we will preserve the very qualities that make Gibraltar special, whilst ensuring economic benefits for our community.

Madam Speaker, on heritage it is noted that, very helpfully, the Heritage and Antiquities Advisory Council Parliamentary Report 2023, which was laid before Parliament only last month, covered the activities and the work carried out during the period of January to December 2023.

1915 The report highlighted that four meetings were held by this Committee, in which numerous heritage products were being monitored, some assessed, others restored and a few were even enhanced.

That said, it is important to note that despite some progress made in this area, we are nevertheless still guided by a very much outdated Development Plan: a plan which was published in 2009 and probably drafted much earlier than that; a plan that provides policies and guidance for the development in Gibraltar, yet only has a single paragraph dedicated to heritage protection within its 134 pages.

1920 But much of that plan does not apply now, as the last few decades have witnessed transformational developments which have impacted our infrastructure and highlighted the need for review, for control and for holistic planning. Especially seeing that the current Development Plan of 2009 has not been fit for purpose for quite some time now. So, we eagerly await the publication of the new version, which I understand has only been recently tendered for a few short weeks ago.

1925 If I may briefly refer you to the Government's draft paper, Madam Speaker, entitled: 'Safeguarding our Past, Enriching our Future. A New Vision for Gibraltar's Heritage', which was issued in June 2023. As noted in the foreword, and I quote:

Gibraltar has a rich and unique heritage. It is of significance, as recognition by UNESCO of our World Heritage Site shows. Gibraltar's heritage is vital in defining our identity. It is a reference point in times of change; it helps us understand where we have come from, where we are going, and why we do things in the way that we do. Heritage touches all our lives.

I believe that this may have been quoting, or written by, the Hon. Minister for the Environment.

1935 Gibraltar has a rich and unique heritage, indeed, and therefore tighter controls are clearly needed to further improve heritage protection. Environmental policy and guidance would be welcomed to ensure best practice on sustainability, and it is also important to protect Gibraltar's natural beauty by preserving and integrating heritage sites in light of the historical context with any new developments.

1940 It is very much hoped, therefore, that the new proposed Development Plan caters for all of this, because it is crucial for our Government's resources to be managed effectively so that sufficient parts of our budget can be allocated to heritage, so as to make heritage a central focus of Gibraltar's tourism and not just a mere part of it.

Failure to do so would mean that our heritage would be at risk, and we cannot afford for our historical sites to be left to deteriorate, scaled back, or eliminated altogether. Such a disregard for our heritage would not only erode our identity, but also diminish the cultural richness that attracts tourists from around the world to Gibraltar.

1945 The impact that our heritage has on tourism cannot be overlooked. Tourism is a vital component of Gibraltar's economy, yet the Budget provides inadequate support for this sector. Insufficient investment in our heritage, our infrastructure and marketing will make it all the more challenging to attract and retain visitors. Madam Speaker, our natural beauty and historical sites are key to driving tourist numbers, but without proper funding, guidance and strategic planning we risk losing our competitive edge.

1950 Which finally leads me to briefly comment on the recently new introduced tour guide initiative. The Government had recently introduced this initiative in which, in conjunction with the Gibraltar College, it would be offering a course for a qualification as a licensed guide. The course, we understand, will seek to include information on several of our most popular tourist sites and offerings. In this respect, I would be the first to say that having some kind of regulation and standardisation in this sector is most welcomed.

1955 With that said, our main concern relating to this new initiative stems from the potential for unfair competition coming from across the border. How will they be regulating and placing controls on that? Only last week I personally saw two large groups of tourists being guided by a



1960 Spanish tour operator walking into town whilst being spoken to about our history and our heritage – sometimes, I am told, incorrectly so – each with around 50 people per group.

1965 Will these foreign tour operators, who currently leave no money in Gibraltar, be required to obtain the Licensed Guide qualification from the Gibraltar College? And if so, how does the Government propose to regulate and enforce this requirement? I invite the Government to address this point in its reply, because it makes no sense on this side of the House to subject locals to rules and regulations, particularly requiring them to be qualified as a licensed guide, but not apply them to foreign – Spanish – competition. We hope to obtain clarity on that point so we can better understand this initiative.

1970 Madam Speaker, if I may briefly address you on the environment now. Our unique natural landscape is a gem that requires our utmost care and protection. Our green spaces are diminishing and pollution levels are rising. We are surrounded by construction sites and scaffoldings everywhere you go. Many say that Gibraltar looks unsightly. Worse still, filthy. All of this is not a good look when you want to attract tourism. It is also not good for us, who are living in these conditions.

1975 The use of cars as a preferred mode of transport remains unchanged, adding considerably to the traffic congestion and reducing the quality of the air that we breathe, both in our town and in the Upper Rock. Regrettably, Gibraltar has one of the highest levels of car *per capita* anywhere in the world, and that is something that we should not be particularly proud of. Yet nothing sensible is being done about this.

1980 Earlier this week we were treated to a new pollution levy, one which in effect would cost people £520 a year for having a car that is 10 or more than 10-years-old. A policy which did not do much to protect the environment as long as you could afford to pay to pollute it. A policy which most likely would have hit hardest the poorest in our community: those who own old cars as they cannot afford to buy a new one. And a policy which was not based on the emissions of what your car is producing.

1985 So, regardless of whether you had a 10-year-old hybrid or a 10-year-old diesel, you would essentially both be paying the same. A nonsensical policy that was later qualified on interview on the GBC by the fact that, having himself bought a Porsche to cheer himself up, that happens to be over 10 years old, that he too would be liable to pay this levy.

1990 Well, I am sorry to say, but for most people – most working-class people – they could not buy a Porsche even if they saved up for it, Madam Speaker, let alone buy one because they wanted to cheer themselves up. (*Interjection*) I can totally understand, therefore, why this has been perceived as insulting and degrading by the people of Gibraltar. Nevertheless, I am glad that the Hon. Chief Minister very quickly came to his senses and backtracked on this new budgetary measure in record time.

1995 When analysing some of the data, we can see that according to this year's estimates of expenditure, the departmental budget for the environment was 20% over budget by a total of £1.9 million. From the overspend, a total of £1.5 million was incurred in relation to charges for cleaning streets and public places. The collection and disposal of refuse was also 35% over budget.

2000 It would come as no surprise to anyone that on election year a considerable amount of taxpayers' money was spent towards collection and disposal of refuse and the cleaning of our streets. Whilst these efforts are welcomed, because it is high time that our streets and our air quality are kept clean, it is hoped therefore that such efforts are made on a more regular basis, not least because despite the increases of expenditure in this area, many feel that Gibraltar does not appear to be any cleaner. So, I dare ask: are we really getting value for money here?

2005 Madam Speaker, in terms of the Upper Rock tourist sites and beaches, it is highlighted that these too were slightly over budget by £1 million. Which brings me to my next observation, that is: what exactly was £6.8 million spent on?

2010 Our beaches remain dirty and covered in dust from nearby construction sites and have been for the better part of the last decade now, many of which should have finished some years ago.

We sincerely hope that for the sake of our waters, the beaches and the people who use them that the newly announced Eastside project does not take as much time to complete.

2015 Speaking of our waters, I cannot not highlight the fact that a few weeks ago I had the pleasure of being invited to see a screening of the latest Orca documentary, produced by an award-winning filmmaker who is now based here in Gibraltar. We were also fortunate enough to be treated to some local footage of fin whales and dolphins, and I must say it was absolutely amazing to watch.

2020 I mention this story as it was remarkable to see the incredible marine life surrounding our waters, the incredible biodiversity that we have, to think that an award-winning short-film maker, who had by then travelled around the whole world, came to Gibraltar to record and finalise his video content. Because very quickly it became apparent what a splendid marine habitat we have, and how lucky we are to have it.

Remarkable indeed. But more remarkable still is the fact that we continue to pump raw, untreated sewage into our oceans despite the splendour of marine life surrounding us. Gibraltar is greener than ever, or so they say.

2025 The Straits of Gibraltar, Madam Speaker, are a migratory corridor for whales and dolphins who are both protected species under the Nature Protection Act. In fact, the law says that these animals must not be intercepted or interfered with, and that navigating close to them is not allowed. Yet, reports have been made of people chasing fin whales on their jet skis or chasing dolphins and throwing fishing lines into pods in the hope of catching an under-passing tuna. 2030 Where is the environmental enforcement and protection of the wonderful marine biodiversity that we have?

It appears that the Government has fallen out of touch with the environment. It is doing very little to carry out enforcement within our waters. It is doing even less to mitigate against the negative effects of climate change. So, are we really doing enough? Not in our view.

2035 We believe that is because it is not popular to do so. Because when you are on a desperate mission of vote hunting for your own survival, instead of projecting ourselves on the international stage by perhaps leading in marine life migration and research, we instead make an economy out of environmentally harmful business practices such as bunkering, which often takes place too close to our shores, and whilst we continue to pump raw untreated sewage in our oceans.

2040 Whilst the Government may wish to pretend that we are greener than ever, to that I say there is clearly a lot left more for wanting. This Government needs to do better for each of us, our children and our children's children.

Looking now at renewable energy, I highlight the fact that in 2019 electricity consumption for Gibraltar was around 176 GW. In 2045, electricity use is projected to reach 199 GW. For context, 2045 if we were to go fully renewable, and if we were to use 100% of our available roof space to use solar-mounted PVs, this would only be able to produce approximately 20% of the energy which we will require. The remaining energy would need to be met with additional renewable sources such as mini-farms or even wind supply.

2050 So, I dare ask: is this even attainable? Because the last time questions were asked in this House on renewables, Madam Speaker, we were shocked to hear that despite the hundreds of thousands, if not millions of pounds spent in investment, that Gibraltar's renewable energy production only amounted to a minute 1.4% of our total energy consumption.

Just 1.4% after having spent millions of pounds in this area. Can we do better? Quite frankly, we think so.

2055 But why does all this matter, you might ask yourself? Well, because climate change is increasingly recognised as a threat to the security and stability of every country in the world and that includes Gibraltar. An increase in global temperatures would mean a rise in extremely hot days all year round, a reduction in annual rainfall and a rise in sea temperatures and levels. It will also increase the energy demand for things like air-conditioning, which would undoubtedly put 2060 increasing pressure on our energy grid, and not least our emission targets.

Our surrounding natural environment will be unrecognisable. Natural habitats and biodiversity will regrettably be lost. The loss of our beaches due to coastal erosion or sea level rises will

undoubtedly have an impact on tourist numbers arriving in Gibraltar. This will hurt our economy and more importantly have an impact on the way we live our lives.

2065 Because, Madam Speaker, when I speak with young people, one of their main concerns is the environment and that Government simply pays lip service to the global move to changing the way that we live our lives. So, it is evident that, despite our efforts, there is room for significant improvement if we really are to put our money where our heart is.

2070 Work is needed to get Gibraltar back on track to meet its first carbon budget and also the 2030 interim environmental targets. To do so will require a lot of investment from the Government. Investment with money that we just do not seem to have, or at least budget for.

2075 Nevertheless, going forwards, it is positive to note the recent measures announced by the Hon. Chief Minister on Monday confirming that we will adopt green procurement policies as a requirement to supplying the Government. Policies such as these will no doubt put the onus on the successful tenderer and help in achieving and complying with our environmental targets. A measure that was discussed only recently at one of our environmental committees, which only serves to show the importance of these committees and the value in collaboration in areas where the parties across this House can present a united front, like the environment.

2080 I mean it, when I say that, because I think it is important to do so, to be united in certain policy areas where possible.

When it comes to equalities, I must highlight the excellent progress made in this area, particularly since the inception of the ministry itself, which has no doubt been instrumental in co-ordinating and facilitating the raising of awareness of inequalities wherever they may arise.

2085 In terms of gender equality, women, for instance, are frequently playing key roles within our Government, our businesses, our local community, and that should only be celebrated. With that said, we acknowledge that efforts could be improved to break down the barriers of gender inequality, so that they too are better represented within the senior decision-making positions of our society.

2090 In respect of the LGBTQ+ community, it is commendable that a legal framework was put in place to protect and enshrine the rights of this community. Initiatives like these, which are designed to combat discrimination and provoke diversity, are finally bearing fruit. But there remains much more to do. Pride Month, which has recently concluded, served as an important reminder that we must continue to support our LGBTQ+ community and not rest until every Gibraltarian enjoys the same rights, the same opportunities and the same protections.

2095 In terms of protections, what support groups are being offered to this community? Have we bothered to find out whether higher rates of depression are experienced by those in this community? Gibraltar is small, so it would be relatively easy to gather this data. Data which is of importance so that we can provide the right level of care and support for those who need it the most.

2100 Because, Madam Speaker, the most recent study led by Stonewall in 2018 found that half of the LGBTQ+ community had experienced depression; three in five had experienced anxiety; one in eight people in the LGBTQ+ community aged 18 to 24 have attempted to end their lives. The study also showed that almost half of trans people had thought about taking their own life.

2105 What about hate crime statistics? Do we have any in this area? Is there not an appetite to dig deeper and to understand the root causes of the issues and the problems faced so that we can better protect and support the people of this community? Because whilst Pride celebrations are excellent, we need to do more than just having a commercial yearly event if we are to bring meaningful change to this community.

2110 Madam Speaker, with regard to social equality, having analysed the statistics, I cannot but not highlight the fact that in 2023, the Government received a total of 206 applications for Social Security benefits. From the latest data available on the Department of Social Security website, we can see that, in January alone, there was more than a 100% increase in applications received in comparison to last year. 23 applications had been received for that single month. A worrying trend if this were to continue to rise.

2115 In addition, the number of individuals receiving disability benefit arrangements, according to the latest data, is notable. Of concern is a rising number of children aged 0 to 10 who are receiving disability benefits, which has risen from 63 individuals in January 2023 to 88 individuals in January 2024, representing a 40% increase in just a short 12-month period.

2120 Perhaps something to look into and certainly to keep an eye on, so that we can better assess whether we have the facilities and infrastructure in place to be able to cater for the rising numbers of persons living with disabilities. It is paramount that we are proactive and not reactive in this area, as has been the practice in the past.

2125 Touching again on gender equality, it is notable that we have yet to see the equalisation of pensions between men and women, despite this Government promising to do so. A policy which would have ended the current discrimination between women, who can receive state pensions at 60, and men who currently have to wait until they are 65 to receive it. A promise which has been successively broken since the so-called 'New Dawn' of 2011.

2130 We have yet to see the replacement of maternity leave with parental leave within our legislation, which would otherwise allow parents of newborns to share the paid leave between them. There have been many Bills which have been passed before this House since the start of the new parliamentary term and one wonders why such a simple legislative amendment has not been brought to the floor. If this Government truly stands by its desire to empower women and to remove barriers to equality, then more must be done, and quickly, to provide them with the necessary tools to succeed in their careers or indeed in politics or elsewhere.

2135 On this point, however, I must highlight that a few weeks ago the Hon. Minister for Equality confirmed to this House that a consultation was taking place with members of the private sector on the impact of this legislation and how that would affect their business. We look forward to reviewing the draft Bill and are hopeful that the legislative change will be quickly resolved following such a consultation.

2140 Additionally, whilst we have a halfway house for women, we have yet to see a halfway house for men, despite repeated calls from Action for Housing to do so. I refer to a letter dated 20th May 2024 and addressed to the Hon. Minister for Housing and written on behalf of Action for Housing, where it is noted the following, and I quote:

Dear Minister,

In August 2023 the Government filed plans for an accommodation block at Europa Point, which would provide 256 beds in over 110 rooms for key workers and for homeless men. Prior to this announcement, which we welcomed, the Government had announced a similar facility in October 2020. At this time, the Government said it would construct a hostel comprising 665 beds at the MOT Centre site. This project never went ahead, and instead the Europa Point one was announced, which regrettably has also been shelved.

As we have said on numerous occasions over the years, there is a need to provide a halfway house for men. It is a well-known fact that after separations, it is the mothers with their children who keep the matrimonial home and the fathers leave, some of which are made homeless.

Currently, there is a halfway house for women, but no such facility for men. A similar facility for men, which would give them a temporary roof over their heads once they rebuild their lives and manage to secure more permanent accommodation.

We wish to know whether you have any plans to provide a facility for homeless men, who at the moment have to rely on family members or friends to give them shelter and whose plight is very seldom acknowledged.

2145 A powerful statement indeed. So why is it, I ask, if statistically men are the ones who leave the family home, that we have not set a halfway house up for them? Because, Madam Speaker, when it comes to equalities, the Budget regrettably falls short in addressing the disparities that persist in our society.

2150 Funding cuts to social services, allowances, community programmes all disproportionately affect marginalised groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities, low-income families and our youths. By failing to support these people, we are perpetuating inequality and social injustice for many more years to come.

It is clear, therefore, that whilst this Government attempts to portray itself as a party that champions equality, it is regrettably noted that they have fallen significantly short in attaining that

2155 honour. Whilst things have evidently got better in some areas, there remains desirable improvement in others.

Madam Speaker, I would like to end my address by noting that it is all our collective responsibilities to advocate for a Budget that reflects our values and our priorities.

2160 For my part, we must demand greater investment in environmental sustainability, in youth development, in heritage preservation, social equality and tourism promotion. Only by addressing these issues can we ensure a prosperous and beneficial future for all the people of Gibraltar, and more particularly our young people.

2165 Drawing now to a close, I ask that my contribution and more specifically my criticisms are taken constructively and not destructively. It is important to understand that it is our role as Opposition to ask questions, to demand answers and to hold this Government to account. Therefore, for all the reasons previously expressed, and for all those reasons provided by my hon. colleagues, and for those reasons that are still yet to come, I will not be voting in favour of this Appropriation Bill.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

*(Banging on desks)*

### Adjournment

2170 **Chief Minister (Hon. F R Picardo):** Madam Speaker, if I can thank the hon. Gentleman for that elegant address, despite the conclusion that it reached, which as he knows I will explain later in the week why I think is, frankly, the wrong conclusion. But it was nonetheless a very elegantly and eloquently presented reason for his decision.

I move that the House should now adjourn until tomorrow at 3 p.m.

2175 **Madam Speaker:** I now propose the question which is that this House do now adjourn to tomorrow at 3 p.m. I now put the question which is that this House do now adjourn to tomorrow at 3 p.m. Those in favour? (**Members:** Aye.) Those against? Passed. This House will now adjourn to tomorrow at 3 p.m.

*The House adjourned at 4.46 p.m.*