

PROCEEDINGS OF THE GIBRALTAR PARLIAMENT

MORNING SESSION: 10.33 a.m. – 12.41 p.m.

Gibraltar, Wednesday, 8th July 2026

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The Gibraltar Parliament

The Parliament met at 10.33 a.m.

[MADAM SPEAKER: Hon. Judge K Ramagge Phillips GMH in the Chair]

[CLERK TO THE PARLIAMENT: P A Borge McCarthy in attendance]

SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

Clerk: Meeting of Parliament, Wednesday 8th July 2026. Suspension of Standing Orders. The Hon. Chief Minister.

Chief Minister (Hon. F R Picardo): Madam Speaker, Madam Speaker, I beg to move under Standing Order 7(3) to suspend Standing Order 7(1) in order to proceed with the laying of documents on the table.

Madam Speaker: Those in favour? (**Members:** Aye.) Those against? Carried.

PAPERS TO BE LAID

Clerk: The Hon. Chief Minister.

Chief Minister (Hon. F R Picardo): Madam Speaker, I have the honour to lay on the Table the TGEU Implementation (Uninterrupted Pursuit) Regulations 2026. The TGEU Implementation (Amendment of Act) Regulations 2026 and TGEU Implementation (Designation of Second Line Checks Area) Regulations 2026.

Madam Speaker: Ordered to lie.

APPROPRIATION BILL 2026 — SECOND READING – DEBATE CONTINUED

Clerk: Bills, Second Reading continued.

Madam Speaker: The Hon. Professor Cortes.

Minister for the Environment, Sustainability, Climate Change and Education (Hon. Prof J E Cortes): Madam Speaker, it is indeed for me a rare opportunity to deliver my contribution to this debate after the Hon. Mr Bossino. I welcome it at the same time that I wish his wonderful mother a very happy birthday.

Indeed, yesterday, as I was listening to the Leader of the Opposition, I was preparing some words in response, but the temptation of dedicating more time to Mr Bossino was simply too

much. One theme was common to both, though, but in particular to Mr Bossino, and that is the clear indication that the GSD has absolutely no idea of what it is to govern. Essentially, Madam Speaker, they do not have a clue. They say things as if it were all so easy, clearly showing a total lack of understanding of the complexity of Government, of the need to be nimble and responsive, of being able to adjust direction while always having your destination in mind, particularly when the adjustment will lead to a better outcome.

As with the College, Madam Speaker, where the new site is a much better one than the original, it takes the confidence of a responsible government to respond to changing situations and not be bogged down in a mire of intransigence. It is truly frightening that they tout themselves as a possible government when the speeches we have heard from that side so far can only be described as fantasy.

The GSLP that they describe does not exist. It is a figment of their biased imagination, perhaps fuelled by a few disaffected individuals with a sense of entitlement that has not been satisfied precisely because we do things well. They are fabricating a reality that simply does not exist.

Madam Speaker, Mr Bossino's reference to our manifestos is brazen, coming from a party whose past leader called manifestos wish lists and who have published embarrassing pamphlets as apologies for manifestos. It is déjà vu, Madam Speaker, certainly for someone who fought and won the 2011 Election, to hear Mr Bossino saying falsely about us the same things we said truthfully about them. To use my second favourite Spanish word, Madam Speaker, *inverosimil*. My favourite word, Madam Speaker, by the way, is *perspicacia*, but that is certainly something that does not apply to him. The Gibraltar electorate will see through it, Madam Speaker, of that I am certain.

What is even more unbelievable is the audacity to criticise our schools programme. St. Martin's most certainly was fit for purpose at the time it was designed. More fit for purpose than the old school. Remember that one, Madam Speaker? The one that their newly appointed life member, the Hon. Danny Feetham, a lawyer at Hassan's, I believe, incidentally, said they would not replace. Remember that?

Madam Speaker, Mr Bossino questioned the value of St. Mary's School, probably the best one we have built. Would the GSD not have built it? He questioned the £20 million investment in St. Joseph's schools. Would he stop that project if he were in office? Would the GSD still have Bayside at the old, tired site and still single gender? Or Governor's Meadow and Bishop Fitzgerald in 1960s prefabs where you could not hang a picture up on the wall because if you drilled, you would release asbestos. Seriously? That is a GSD that is wanting to be our Government? *Qué horror, Dios mío. Es que no tiene ni idea.*

It is a classic double thing. They complain that we have not done something and when we have done it, they complain that we have done it. Not surprising, as the GSD's world would be as dystopian as George Orwell's.

Mr. Bossino goes on and on about the Upper Rock, clearly jealous of what we are achieving, and seems not to respect the important principle of commercial confidentiality. Not something I am sure that the businesses that he wants to woo, as he criticises my friend and colleague, the Hon. Gemma Arias-Vasquez, would like to hear. Then he ends with his alleged messages of hope. He criticises what he calls a concrete jungle, even though we have more trees and green areas than we ever have before.

He wants to be the champion of supply teachers, many of whom have qualified in the university we created, through the PGCE courses we set up, on the scholarships we provide, and who have more opportunities than ever, as we have increased the complement of teachers by over 200, with more opportunities coming soon, as we will see later. We value our supply teachers. We will not allow them to be used in this way and we will certainly look after them.

Madam Speaker, Mr Bossino really enjoys having a go at me. He has nothing, nothing at all to offer. That is fine. He can criticise me all that he likes. Because, to paraphrase Denis Healey, when he referred to Geoffrey Howe, being criticised by Damon Bossino is like being savaged by a dead sheep.

Madam Speaker, in now turning to my previously prepared speech, I refer to another quote, this time from George W. Bush, who once said,

> it is clearly a budget, it has got a lot of numbers in it.

It clearly has, but this one has also got a lot of words in it. Given the breadth of my responsibilities, my speech, I am afraid, will have a lot of words in it too.

Madam Speaker, running through the theme of the speech today is how our community has evolved, changed for the better over the past 15 years, which was central to the Chief Minister's address yesterday, and how this process will continue with the GSLP Liberals. For as we look to the future, we know that we are entering a new era for Gibraltar, an era in which we will see new and better ways of living. A successful Gibraltar is a Gibraltar that evolves, evolving into a new status within the wider region, as a frontier fence becomes simply a border and possibilities widen.

Evolution, by definition, always leads to better, because those who do not adapt and embrace change are doomed to extinction. I must repeat my thanks and admiration for the work of the Chief and Deputy Chief Ministers and their teams, 10 years of tireless and relentless negotiations with just one goal in mind, that of safeguarding our community.

I have no doubt, Madam Speaker, that they have led us to the best outcome for Gibraltar. This Government has kept us safe from several existential threats over the years, and has safeguarded our community for generations to come. Regardless of political affiliations, Madam Speaker, I know that any historian who in the future reviews the situation objectively will quickly see the immense value of what has been achieved. Those of us who are old enough to remember the closed Frontier can naturally understand the uncertainty and fear that may exist. It is the mind of some as we move to a way of living with a border, but without a frontier fence. We will always retain our identity as a people. The Frontier does not define us as a people any more than our valuable fluency in the Spanish language does. We are the only ones who can and will define ourselves as a community and a people.

Madam Speaker, under the continued leadership of the GSLP Liberal Government, the community at large can be sure that, to quote that famous adage, British we are and British we stay. We govern with one overriding purpose, to leave a lasting legacy for Gibraltar.

I say this, proud of the legacy that already exists, as someone who has the privilege today of delivering his 15th consecutive Budget speech in this Parliament. A speech which, Madam Speaker, I assure you, will not be the penultimate one that I deliver from this side of the House.

Madam Speaker, we have seen 15 years of transformational change in Gibraltar. The benchmark has been set, our record proven, and just as evolution is critical for continued survival, we too are evolving and renewing as a Government. A Government that is poised and ready to continue to deliver for our people, now more than ever, riding the new challenges like a wave of continuing positive change. Despite recent developments on a global scale, we have the combination of new blood and generational experience necessary to keep us safe.

Madam Speaker, I will begin my review proper with environment, given that it is the portfolio that I have held the longest. In fact, in order to give myself some light relief during the serious matter of drafting the speech, I asked Chat GPT who was the longest serving Environment Minister in the world. This is what the AI tool had to say. I quote:

> While there is no official Guinness World Record or UN maintained ranking for this, John Cortés is a strong candidate for the world's longest serving current Environment Minister. His longevity is unusual, because most environment Ministers change every few years, even in stable governments.

I have every intention of extending this record even further. (banging on desks)

Madam Speaker, as our climate changes, our resolve to protect our environment does not. As we move into the new relationship with the EU, the Department of Environment has worked tirelessly on a massive task to review and set up systems which will ensure that we comply with

EU legislation. What we have always maintained, we would keep dynamic alignment on environmental standards. This was voluntary. There is no denying that the environment will be better protected under more focused legislative alignment with the EU. Thankfully, Madam Speaker, we are already in a good position as a result of our work in particular on our much acclaimed 25-year environment plan and our climate change strategy.

The 25-year plan was published at the end of 2025. Based on the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals and built around six key themes, the plan aligns strategically with the agreement as it sets out to ensure that Gibraltar's environmental commitments mirror or improve on those of the EU.

Much of my team's work this year has indeed been devoted to the agreement and to what it means for the stewardship of our environment. Working closely with colleagues in the Gibraltar Law Offices and with private drafting counsel, we have already published over 10 new pieces of legislation with more than the same number again due to be published imminently. Gibraltar will now stand fully aligned with the EU on environmental matters and we will ensure that we deliver on these manifold commitments. The Treaty brings with it environmental obligations to both sides and we will be vigilant to ensure that everyone in the region on both sides of the border complies. We look forward to working together towards a better environment for all the species that inhabit the whole of our region.

I want to recall the work the Department undertakes in monitoring and controlling construction across Gibraltar. The East side Reclamation Project receives daily visits from the team as well as being continuously monitored with direct camera links to ensure that mitigation measures and construction management plans are observed. This monitoring includes the issuing of strict instructions, always complied with, to halt works when environmental or weather conditions so require. I am very clear that my responsibility to the environment is paramount. Otherwise, Madam Speaker, as American writer Kurt Vonnegut wrote,

> we will go down in history as the first society that would not save itself because it was not cost effective.

This project must proceed quickly and will bring long-term environmental benefits as well as finally removing that unsightly rubble mountain, and my team will ensure that any potential negative impact during the process is neutralised. Other major projects receive regular intervention from our technical section, ensuring that planning conditions are met at the proper stage.

In order, Madam Speaker, to increase the contribution of renewable energy, following a competitive process, we only last week signed an MOU for a substantial solar installation, and we will this week publish a further call for expressions of interest to expand the solar power network. The Government wants the benefit of clean energy transition to be shared across the whole community, not only those with the means and the roof space to install their own solar panels. We will bring forward an enabling framework for renewable energy communities so that residents and small businesses can share in the energy generated on the buildings around them. We will establish the law that defines these communities and bring forward pilot schemes on suitable buildings. In doing so, Gibraltar will give effect to the standards set out in the renewable energy regulations, our environmental commitments and putting clean, locally owned energy within reach of those who might otherwise be left behind.

Madam Speaker, the new waste management contract has resulted in an increase in the amount of paper, cardboard and plastic sorted and sent for recycling. The application for the expanded sorting facility will soon be considered by DPC, with the energy from waste element of the plant to be submitted once the technical details have been considered. We will also be trialling changes to organic waste collection, introducing a specific restaurant collection service in order to maximise the collection of organic matter.

Madam Speaker, in relation to the Wastewater Sewage Treatment Plant, this has now obtained outline planning permission, a full planning application is expected by the end of August and the

project is expected to break ground by September. In addition to the progress on the plant, there is an ongoing major project to lay new sewage mains in phases, a huge investment in Gibraltar's sewer infrastructure. This clearly indicates the Government's commitment to renovating the se wage system to cope with growth and ensuring that wastewater is dealt with in an environmentally sound manner.

The Environmental Agency and its team of staff continues to deliver across their full breadth of responsibilities. Further details to those I deliver here will be provided in the published version of the speech. The agency is working in close consultation with the Government Law Officers to review and modernise food hygiene regulations, including efforts to finalise legislation relating to food allergens, a critical step towards strengthening consumer rights and improving food labelling standards in Gibraltar. This will include our version of the UK's Benedict's Law, which will overhaul school allergy training following the untimely death of Benedict Blythe after an accidental exposure to an allergen in school in the UK in 2021.

Madam Speaker, Gibraltar's air quality and emissions inventory programmes continue to provide real-time public access to pollutant data online. The 2024 results, the latest which have been fully validated, show that Gibraltar complied with all major pollutant limit values. This would have been unimaginable when we came into Government, when the GSD had to obtain air quality derogations and even then, did not comply with EU standards. All pollutants, including the most dangerous PM10 and PM2.5, as well as sulphur dioxide, ozone and carbon monoxide, remained within legal limits with drops in the levels of particles reflecting the positive impact of cleaner electricity generation and reduced road transport emissions in general.

Emissions from electricity generation have fallen by 37% since 2015, largely due to the transition from diesel to LNG. Road transport emissions have decreased by 28% since 2015, dipping below post-COVID rebound levels. These long-term reductions demonstrate that Gibraltar's climate and air quality policies are delivering measurable benefits, even as targeted action is now required to address a few remaining NO2 hotspots. The latest 2025 dataset, soon to be validated, indicates that pollutant levels remain compliant.

Madam Speaker, the dedicated pest control team investigates complaints and implements modern treatment methods using the latest approved pesticides and integrated pest management techniques to reduce pest populations. Mosquito control has become an increasingly important part of the agency's work due to the growing regional presence of mosquito-borne diseases in southern Spain. Close links are maintained with the UK Health Security Agency mosquito team. This collaboration helps assess Gibraltar's potential exposure to West Nile virus, dengue fever and chikungunya, and ensures our surveillance remains aligned with international best practice. Officers are now preparing to launch a targeted campaign to dose storm drains with BTI, a biological larvicide used to control mosquito larvae before they emerge as adults. This work will be carried out across known breeding hotspots during the warmer months. The agency will continue to strengthen its surveillance, treatment and public education efforts to ensure Gibraltar remains well protected against emerging vector-borne risks.

The Agency has been working closely with HM Customs and other competent authorities to ensure that Gibraltar is fully prepared for the challenges that Treaty transitions bring. In parallel with operational planning, the Agency has been involved in the legislative review and gap analysis work required under the agreement. They have been working with the Law Officers to ensure that our regulatory system remains robust and fully aligned with the obligations and opportunities created by the Treaty.

The Agency is also engaged in the permitting process for the new Wastewater Treatment Plant and Waste Management facility, probably the most significant environmental infrastructure project undertaken in Gibraltar in a generation. Once operational, these facilities will significantly strengthen Gibraltar's capacity to manage waste, increase our self-sufficiency and help ensure that we continue to meet our environmental responsibilities for decades to come.

This year, Madam Speaker, Western Beach has been officially classified as excellent in the latest bathing water quality assessment. This is the first time Western Beach has achieved the

highest possible rating under the bathing water directive. All other Gibraltar beaches continue to maintain excellent status, reflecting consistently high water quality. Along with its bathing water duties, the agency operates a routine sampling programme for public swimming pools, ensuring that recreational water remains safe and compliant with microbiological and chemical standards.

This programme includes the St. Martin's hydrotherapy pool, where regular water quality testing and oversight are carried out to support the therapeutic work delivered. Hydrotherapy sessions have expanded significantly and ongoing monitoring ensures that the pool remains safe, well-maintained and fully compliant with health protection requirements as usage increases.

The Agency continues to act as Gibraltar's competent authority for the control of major accident hazards, COMAH. Over the past year, they have maintained the annual inspection cycle of the energy terminal. They also undertook a lower-tier COMAH inspection at GibOil Tank Farm, marking an important expansion of regulatory oversight across major hazard establishments. In partnership with the Office of Civil Contingencies, the Agency is preparing for the triennial live exercise of the energy terminal, which is planned to take place in October.

Officers are increasing patrols and enforcement against pet owners who fail to register or licence their pets or who allow fouling in public spaces. In 2025, 349 DNA samples were taken, resulting in 77 fixed penalty notices and so far, this year, 140 samples have led to 37 notices. In 2025, 28 FPNs were issued for unlicensed or unregistered dogs and 3 have been issued so far in 2026. These actions ensure accountability and strengthen the effectiveness of the overall campaign. I want to thank the Agency for the highly technical and often unseen work in all these areas.

Madam Speaker, last October, Gibraltar successfully completed Exercise Rocky Pigeon, the triennial multi-agency test of our radiation emergency plans. The exercise rigorously assessed every level of the response. Independent observers noted the professionalism of all teams involved, the coordination between operational and command structures and the overall robustness of Gibraltar's emergency arrangements. The Ministry of Defence's nuclear regulator has since confirmed Gibraltar's continued authorisation as an operational berth for nuclear-powered vessels. Although the likelihood of a radiation incident in Gibraltar remains extremely low, we do not take our preparedness for granted. The work undertaken over the past year demonstrates once again Gibraltar's commitment and success in maintaining the highest standards of safety, coordination and resilience.

Madam Speaker, the inclement weather this year with its torrential rain and storms created additional challenges to the team that prepared our beaches. Despite this, as I committed last year, we brought forward the start of the official bathing season to the 23rd of May, extending the beach service to the community. As is the case every season, remedial works were required at all our beaches. These works are extremely time-sensitive with a limited window of operation, the start of which is determined by the end of the late spring stormy season. Despite these new challenges, the bathing season is well underway. A detailed list of the works done on the beaches this year will be provided in the annex to the published version of this speech. I would like to add at this point that the Government will be carrying out a complete new-look overhaul of Little Bay ahead of next year's bathing season and financial provision for this is being sought in this Bill.

Madam Speaker, the team at North Front Cemetery continues to work hard on daily management and beautification. We have had great success in working with colleagues at the Ministry for Equality and now use the assistance of the Offenders Community Hour Scheme in maintenance works. Further organisational improvements at the cemetery are planned.

Madam Speaker, the American philosopher and naturalist Aldo Leopold wrote,

> one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on nature is quite invisible to laymen.

Yes, the wounds hurt, Madam Speaker, which is why as always, I remain committed to helping to heal them, including by planting more trees, creating greener public spaces and improving Gibraltar's environment for everyone. The Lebanese American poet Khalil Gibran wrote,

> trees are poems that the earth writes upon the sky.

Despite the limited space available, we continue to identify opportunities wherever possible to increase Gibraltar's tree cover and replace trees that have died. During the first 5 months of this year, a total of 32 trees were planted across Gibraltar, 18 of which were planted in North Front Cemetery. During the year, a number of trees had to be removed due to severe storm damage. We, however, always ensure that every tree removed is replaced, ensuring that Gibraltar's urban forest continues to grow and improve.

We have also invested in improving the appearance of our streets and public spaces. No one can fail to notice and indeed to welcome the decorative flower carts and troughs that have been placed and renewed along Main Street and elsewhere, adding colour and character to Gibraltar's busiest pedestrian areas. These projects are making a significant difference to the look and feel of our public spaces. They create a more welcoming environment for residents and visitors, while bringing colour and life to some of Gibraltar's busiest locations. The displays are extremely popular and we have been able to prove that they can last, being well maintained. They are serving as an inspiration to others and so we are planning new initiatives, working with the private sector and with the Horticultural Society, that will see and encourage more planting and the greening of more urban areas. Soon, we will have new leafy nooks appearing in different parts of Gibraltar.

The Gibraltar Botanic Gardens continue maintaining and beautifying the grounds and expanding their work in education and researching the ecology and conservation of plants and animals, including Gibraltar's endemic plants, and ensuring that the Gibraltar Campion avoids extinction. They are currently carrying out a thorough survey and assessment of all of our wild plants as part of their important wider advisory role to the Department of the Environment. The grounds staff work hard throughout the year, and the efforts are obvious because the gardens are more beautiful year on year. I have highlighted before that they coordinate a large group of volunteers who help to maintain the grounds, and we should all be very grateful that there are people willing to dedicate their free time to keep one of Gibraltar's jewels looking better than ever.

The parks along Queensway have changed Gibraltar and it is hard to understand now how it was that they attracted so much criticism from the benches opposite when announced and developed. It is no exaggeration to say that the parks have improved our quality of life. They are much needed and most popular green lands in the urban environment and important public leisure areas which provide valuable space for young and old and a refuge for one's mental health.

Madam Speaker, Gibraltar's identity is inseparable from the sea that surrounds us and the protection of our maritime environment remains among our foremost responsibilities. British Gibraltar Territorial Waters are a living environment of real ecological value which we are obliged now more than ever to manage to a high and demonstrable standard. The Marine Strategy Regulations require us to assess the health of our waters against a comprehensive set of descriptors and to work towards good environmental status across each.

Madam Speaker, this is a substantial undertaking for a territory of our size, and the Department will be commissioning additional work on the monitoring programme on which sound marine policy must rest.

The Environmental Research and Protection Unit which this Government created is a clear example of our vision. The team works tirelessly, often behind the scenes, to protect the environment. They do incredible work on animal sightings, wildlife rescues and investigations.

Madam Speaker, as a former NGO activist, I will always pay tribute to the vital work done by our NGOs and to their passion in protecting our environment. I will always reassure them, and I

do so again now, Madam Speaker, that despite my move away from that area 15 years ago, my own passion for the environment remains as strong as ever.

The oldest of our environmental NGOs, the Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society, GONHS for short, this year celebrates its 50th anniversary. I can well remember the early days back in the early 1970s and how a group of young bird watchers morphed into the internationally recognised organisation it is today. I wish them all a very happy and proud 50th anniversary, continuing their valuable work in research, advocacy and conservation.

The Environmental Safety Group continues to very actively and effectively pursue its environmental objectives, lobbying and advocacy. They recently partnered with the Royal Commonwealth Society in their worldwide plastic campaign during the World Baton Relay, carrying out a shoreline clean-up with the support of Bayside School in addition to the annual Clean Up the World.

Another anniversary is the Nautilus Project's 10th. This organisation's work in the marine field is well known and if I may highlight one project, it is seagrass reintroduction, but all the rest of the outstanding educational and research work must also be recognised and admired. A great deal of work is going into the seagrass project, with a laboratory having been set up with 20 temperature-controlled tanks, showing survival and growth, indicating positive signs of success, and I am looking forward to seeing seagrass meadows once again in our waters.

Most recently, the Gibraltar Horticultural Society has increased its activity in promoting green areas, such as the bus shelter initiative, as well as taking an active part in encouraging all, especially the young, to appreciate green spaces, which they do with the other organisation, The Whole Wild World.

Madam Speaker, the Gibraltar Nature Reserve is one of the component limbs of the Gibraltar National Park. This year, one positive from all the rain was the beautifully exuberant vegetation on the Upper Rock, and indeed throughout our natural areas. The Moorish Castle, the dungeons and the Discovery Trail are now very near successful completion and will be opening to the public soon, no doubt to the consternation of one particular Member opposite.

Subsequently, Madam Speaker, the Jungle Park and the Northern Defences are envisaged to be ready early next year. The premises at the Moorish Castle are being extended to include new site offices to accommodate the needs of Upper Rock staff and visitors.

Madam Speaker, heritage sites have long been neglected and revenue generated from the Nature Reserve was never properly reinvested into the sites themselves. We have taken a different approach by increasing ticket prices for non-residents and introducing modern visitor management systems. Revenue from the Nature Reserve has increased from around £3.7 million to over £16 million. That revenue is now being reinvested directly into conservation, restoration, maintenance and improved visitor experience.

Those who choose to criticise fail to see the value of this partnership and probably will still not recognise it when they see all the new sites opened. It is a shame.

It is a successful partnership, not a privatisation. Supervised always by our dedicated public servants, the Upper Rock officers and Upper Rock supervisors. Together with the management teams based at Navier Battery and Tovey Cottage, they do incredible work in our natural and heritage areas. Other areas of the Nature Reserve, Jews Gate, Apes Den, Devil's Gap and the lower section of Charles V Wall, O'Hara's Battery and Tovey Cottage Educational Centre will soon be tackled.

Among further improvements coming to the Nature Reserve, the Butterfly Park at Lewis Battery, renovated Princess Caroline Battery, Princess Anne and Princess Amelia's Battery and the restoration of Devil's Gap Battery are new projects that will form part of the next stage of improvements and development. These new attractions will undoubtedly further provide tourist appeal and resident enjoyment to the Gibraltar Nature Reserve.

We continue, Madam Speaker, also to work very closely with tour operators to improve the Upper Rock experience. To this effect, we have recently changed traffic arrangements and launched in partnership with the Taxi Association the new electric shuttle bus service to the Upper

Rock, providing accessible electric transport in response to the cable car closure. Since its start at the beginning of June, over 5,000 passengers have used the shuttle. Madam Speaker, this operation, which has been publicly welcomed by the ESG, is setting the example for sustainable transport on the Upper Rock. It is a better and cleaner experience and I will be encouraging operators to follow suit in renewing their fleet of ageing vehicles.

Madam Speaker, back to the natural world. Nesting yellow-legged gull numbers are the lowest since records began. The last census carried out this spring shows a steady decline since the early 2000s with a total of 450 nests located in 2025 compared to 1,741 in 2002. The survey shows a 33% decrease compared to the last full survey in 2023 with 667 breeding pairs were recorded. The likely causes of the decline include several main factors including the ongoing culling efforts and the disturbance and predation of eggs and young, the latter by both foxes and ravens. Some areas have shown the almost total disappearance of nesting gulls such as most of the Upper Rock and the east side sand slopes.

Madam Speaker, the 2026 Nesting Bird of Prey Survey led by the inimitable Vincent Robba recorded the following: 6 pairs of Peregrines raising 15 young, 9 pairs of Common Kestrels raising 26 young, 4 pairs of Little Owls likely nesting by Eagle Owls and Tawny Owls and a pair of ravens raising 3 young. This reflects the healthy state of our natural environment. In addition, 2 Bonelli's Eagles and 2 Lesser Kestrels were hatched in captivity and 22 birds were rehabilitated.

Madam Speaker, the Macaque Management Team led by the Gibraltar Veterinary Clinic continues to contribute to the well-being and preservation of our beloved macaques. Their work has ensured the population remains under control at approximately 200 individuals and wandering into urban areas is at an all-time low. Urbanisation of monkeys is actively guarded against with macaque management staff returning roaming monkeys to the Nature Reserve before they can settle. The success of macaque management includes not culling any longer, Madam Speaker, but limiting births per pack while allowing for natural social interactions and afternoon feeds which focus on re-establishing the foraging nature. Furthermore, as a direct result of improved enforcement of the ban on illegal feeding, there has been a marked reduction in macaque bite incidents this year and further enforcement on site will soon be provided. The Government will continue to invest in our macaques and safeguard their health, well-being and long-term future on the Rock which, as we all know, is of legendary importance.

On research, the Department is working with the University of Gibraltar on their research project which is tracking the movement of individual macaques fitted with transmitters and I am pleased to have authored the chapter on the Barbary Macaque in the forthcoming Atlas of European Mammals due out in a few months' time. I can also announce now that next year's Calpe Conference will have several sessions dedicated to research into the Barbary Macaque in what will be a conference on the natural history of both shores of the Strait.

Madam Speaker, there was great acclaim some months ago, at least in some of my circles, when the Scottish Parliament introduced legislation to make it obligatory to provide swift nest sites in new buildings. I want to highlight that this is an area in which Gibraltar leads the world, with these provisions having become standard planning conditions decades ago, and we have been used as the example in the growing campaign to make this law in the United Kingdom too.

I personally have taken the opportunity of visits to Parliament to lobby in this regard and will continue to do so, taking the campaign also to Brussels and the European Union, expecting the EU to do what they expect us to do, that is adopt the more positive environmental policies of the other partner.

As the Deputy Chief Minister stated yesterday, I have the honour of chairing the Environmental Ministers' Council of the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies. In that capacity, I have chaired 2 virtual meetings and have represented the OTs in a number of conferences and seminars this year. I had the honour to write a foreword to the UK Overseas Territories Biodiversity Strategy, launched in London last November, and to give evidence in person to the UK Parliamentary Select Committee on Biodiversity in the Overseas Territories.

Among the legislative instruments that we have seen this past year are improvements to the Animals Act, now including the Five Freedoms, defining the seriousness of pet theft and introducing the concept of animal sentience. The Keeping of Animals Act has also provided additional safeguard to animals in captivity and a Bill published just last week will give formal recognition to our national species.

In 1785, Robert Burns wrote:

> I am truly sorry man's dominion has broken nature's social union.

He was so right even then, which is why it is vitally important that we spare no effort in protecting and enhancing our natural environment, which we are doing by protecting our natural areas, creating and rewilding new areas, and by removing invasive species.

The richness of our natural environment, which is thriving under our protection, does not go unnoticed. I am hugely proud to announce a partnership between the Government and Nigel Marvin Productions to produce for global distribution a 50-minute documentary to be called Wild Gibraltar. Nigel is a renowned presenter and director of prime wildlife documentaries, including the famous Chased by Dinosaurs, a prehistoric park series and others such as Wild Arabia and Wild Bangladesh. Wild Gibraltar will capture Gibraltar's wildlife on camera and promote us globally using the Nigel Marvin brand, no doubt encouraging many nature lovers to visit us.

I move now, Madam Speaker, to heritage. Heritage is not simply the conservation of old buildings or monuments, it is also about identity, memory, education, belonging and cultural continuity. It is about understanding who we are as a people, how we arrived here, and how we ensure that future generations continue to engage meaningfully with all of the different eras in Gibraltar's rich and layered history.

Heritage, Madam Speaker, is also Utrecht and heritage will be the UK-EU Treaty. Over the past year, the Ministry for Heritage has included expanding its work in all these fields. One of the most significant achievements has been the continued development of Gibraltar's historic environment record and wider digital heritage infrastructure.

The Ministry has continued expanding the public heritage website, which includes a growing and searchable body of information relating to listed buildings, century posts, interpretation panels, World War II defensive structures and more. In parallel, work is progressing on the creation of Gibraltar's first publicly accessible Register of Heritage Buildings, a collaboration with the Gibraltar Heritage Trust, a register which will include buildings, structures, gardens and other sites of historical importance, ensuring that planners, developers and the wider public have access to a clearer understanding of Gibraltar's historical environment.

Madam Speaker, this work is helping establish the foundations of a modern and accessible heritage management system for Gibraltar, integrating conservation, planning, research and public interpretation into a single evolving framework.

Another major achievement has been the completion of a substantial documentation initiative recording 85 World War II pillboxes, positions and defensive structures and work will now commence on restoration of those that need it. The project reflects Gibraltar's strategic importance during the Second World War and forms part of a broader effort to preserve and better understand its 20th century military landscape. As we have seen, substantial progress has also continued in the Moorish Castle complex, including the restoration of the Tower of Homage at the Moorish Castle and the external cleaning of the Gatehouse, and now, as we know, extensive work also continues within the Northern Defences.

Conservation, interpretation and enhancement works have also progressed at City Under Siege exhibition, the World War II Tunnels and the final phase of restoration work to the Convent facade as part of a wider programme of improvements to heritage infrastructure.

We are now embarking on new projects, including the restoration of the gun and battery at O'Hara's, the Princess suite of batteries and the Great Siege Tunnels to the highest of standards that we have already seen at World War II tunnels. We are also planning the restoration of the

mediaeval Round Tower at Line Wall, which is now formally listed, along with ongoing conservation works at sites such as St Andrew's Church, the Cathedral of St Mary the Crown and the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity.

In addition, but relevant to heritage, is the work led by the Deputy Chief Minister in the restoration of the Mount, the Old Fortress Headquarters and Rosia Bay.

The Ministry has now completed and expanded a substantial programme of interpretation panels covering themes throughout Gibraltar, including sites, historical timelines and memorials for historical figures. These are transforming Gibraltar's urban environment into what has increasingly been described as an open-air classroom.

During the year, structured educational resources and history curricula were developed for Key Stages 1 and 2, including worksheets, lesson plans and learning materials.

The Ministry's work in the field of intangible heritage and linguistic identity has also continued to expand. Work to extend the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage of Gibraltar continues alongside wider work relating to the development aimed at recognising and strengthening Gibraltar's unique linguistic and cultural identity. This work has increasingly been complemented by international academic engagement and collaboration. This year, the Ministry for Heritage was once again represented at the Gibraltar International Conference held at the University of Cadiz, which brought together academics, writers, linguists and researchers from universities across Europe to discuss Gibraltar's language, literature, identity and frontier spaces. Particularly encouraging was the significant academic attention given to Gibraltarian literature and writers.

Gibraltar was also represented for the first time at the Congress of the European Federation of Fortified Sites held in Diest, Belgium some weeks ago. Madam Speaker, it is important that Gibraltar actively participates in these international discussions surrounding our history, heritage and culture. Such engagement strengthens our understanding of Gibraltar internationally while reinforcing our own cultural confidence.

The Ministry and the Heritage and Antiquities Council continue working closely with Town Planning on the revision of the Old Town Design Guide and the Development Plan, seeking to reinforce the protection of traditional architectural elements such as Genoese shutters, line-rendered facades and clay roof tiles, while still addressing development pressures of Gibraltar's historic urban environment.

We also continue working to strengthen statutory protections through the additional listings and amendments under the Act. This year included protection of additional historic buildings that feature across Gibraltar and the declaration of Europa Point Foreshore as an archaeological site.

Madam Speaker, the Government will shortly be proceeding with the designation of importing surviving frontier infrastructure associated with Gibraltar's historic landscape Frontier. I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to the small but dedicated staff at the Ministry of Heritage, the Heritage and Antiquities Council, the Gibraltar National Museum, the Gibraltar Garrison Library, the Gibraltar Heritage Trust, Friends of Gibraltar Heritage, Fortress of Gibraltar Group, Multilingual Gibraltar and the many volunteers, researchers, educators and community partners who continue contributing towards the protection and promotion of Gibraltar's heritage.

I must give special mention here to the group of young people who have carried out outstanding conservation work in the once abandoned no man's land between Moorish Castle and the Tower of Homage. They really are working hard in protecting our heritage.

Heritage is not simply about preserving the past, it is about understanding ourselves, strengthening our identity, educating future generations and ensuring that the story of Gibraltar remains visible, accessible and valued within our society and the Government remains fully committed to this vision.

Turning now to the work of the Gibraltar National Museum. In doing so, Madam Speaker, I want to pay tribute to Joaquín Bensusan, the previous curator of the museum, who passed away recently and who is very much the creator of the museum we have now, inspiring in his day many children and young people, including the present director and myself.

Indeed, we have lost two heritage greats in recent months. Another mentor of mine and the publisher of my first book back in 1980, Tito Benady, also passed away recently, leaving behind a wealth of publications and other contributions to the knowledge of our heritage. May they rest in peace.

This year marks the centenary of the discovery of the fragmented cranium of a four-year-old Neanderthal Gibraltarian child, which was excavated by Dorothy Garrod in 1926. A number of events have been organised to mark this special occasion in the Global Scientific Calendar, which will reach its zenith with a bumper Calpe Conference in September, including a full four days of sessions and a visit to Gorham's Cave.

So, this year's special Calpe Conference is an extended one, designed to accommodate the world's leading scientists in the field of human origins. Just have a glance at the conference programme, Madam Speaker, which is now published to see what I mean. No fewer than 50 academic institutions from 14 countries are represented. This high-profile conference cements the work that the National Museum team has been carrying out for three decades in the process of having become one of the world's centres of excellence in this field.

Madam Speaker, it seems that to some, at least to one, the work and value of the museum is only to be measured by the number of visitors, as if its sole function was to be a tourist site. These views, which would hold that any decrease in numbers reflects a poor product, are easily dismissible by simply looking at the complementary comments in the visitor's book. The wider research and educational service that the museum does with Gibraltar is something of which we are rightly proud.

Madam Speaker of another anniversary, it is the 10th anniversary of the inscription of Gorham's Cave as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This was a major achievement for the Government, for Gibraltar and for its heritage, one that put it on a list alongside such wonders as Machu Picchu, Taj Mahal, Memphis and the Giza Pyramids, and the Galapagos Islands. This, thanks to the painstaking and tireless work of the museum team, which brought to light the outstanding universal value of a site that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Yet another anniversary, Madam Speaker: the Calpe Conference itself reaches its 30th year. To have kept such a prominent position, bringing to Gibraltar top researchers in many diverse fields, must fill us with pride, unless we all devalue the museum's work on the basis of visitor numbers.

Apart from the day-to-day functions expected from the museum, the team has been actively engaged in the development of the Moorish Castle, which I mentioned already, presenting interpretation with stories that include a significant component of prime research by the team.

This year, we will see further expansion of projects with improvements to the visitor experience at Europa Advanced Battery Viewing Platform. Sensitive sites, Madam Speaker, cannot be open to mass tourism, so the museum is carefully exploring the conservation of Stay Behind Cave in ways in which access might be improved and interpretation provided. As with Gorham, visitor numbers have to be restricted here in order to conserve the site as best as possible.

Madam Speaker, I continue my engagement with the Gibraltar Heritage Trust and greatly value our relationship. Their input is critical in our management of heritage, and I thank them for their tireless work and efforts. I am very much looking forward to their latest project at Europa Point Lighthouse coming to fruition.

Madam Speaker, the Gibraltar Garrison Library continues to operate as a hub for visitors and researchers. I am very pleased that we propose to increase the level of funding to this important historical institution which will help support a much-needed conservation project to assess the environmental conditions within the library building. The library team is liaising with experienced conservators in the UK to use digital sensors to collect environmental data with the aim of commencing work towards the end of this year.

The collections held at the Garrison Library are not only unique but important to our Gibraltar story. These funds will also support book conservation and the creation of infrastructure to speed up the library's digitisation project and creating scope for their collections to be digitally conserved and made accessible digitally and searchable.

Tea rooms in the front garden are also imminent, with expressions of interest for operators recently advertised. Not many will know, Madam Speaker, that ours is the first of such Garrison libraries to have been established and the last remaining. That a 233-year-old library remains relevant in this 21st century is remarkable. The key here has been the prevailing relevance of this library across swathes of history and the key for its longevity is to continue maintaining this relevance. All this is a testament to how Gibraltar values its heritage.

Madam Speaker, my Morocco portfolio continues to build upon the ties that unite Gibraltar and our neighbouring kingdom to the south. Through educational, cultural, environmental and professional exchanges, we are building relationships that promote mutual understanding, create opportunities for collaboration and further Gibraltar's presence and reputation across the strait.

I want to acknowledge the dedication of my very small but very active Morocco team and the valuable work of the many organisations and individuals who continue to support this relationship. In particular, I want to recognise the contribution of the Gibraltar-Morocco Business Association, the Strait of Gibraltar Association, Tarourate Charity and RifCom, whose efforts continue to foster meaningful links between our communities.

During the year, our engagement with Morocco has continued at the highest level. I was pleased to meet the recently appointed British Ambassador, His Excellency Alex Pinfield, at the Remembrance Day Sunday service in Tangier. More recently, during a working visit to Rabat, my team and I were hosted by Ambassador Pinfield, providing a valuable opportunity to discuss Gibraltar-Morocco relations and identify further areas for cooperation. These exchanges have helped strengthen Gibraltar's link with the United Kingdom's diplomatic representation in Morocco and have opened further opportunities.

During the same visit to Rabat, I met with senior officials from Morocco's Ministry of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development. Discussions focused on compliance with international environmental conventions, energy transition and potential areas for cooperation. I was honoured to visit the Apostolic Nuncio to Morocco, His Excellency Archbishop Alfred Xuereb, who I had met during the Episcopal Ordination of Bishop Charles Azzopardi. This provided an opportunity to discuss matters of mutual interest and collaboration.

Education continues to be one of the strongest pillars of our engagement with Morocco. Gibraltar participated in the National Forum of Teachers in Rabat, a major event that brought together thousands of educated academics, school leaders and policy makers from across Morocco, providing an important opportunity to showcase Gibraltar's educational experience, exchange examples of good practice and establish valuable contacts within Morocco's educational sector. Meetings were also held with representatives of Morocco's Ministry of National Education and the Mohamed VI Foundation for Education.

I was pleased to meet with British Council Country Director Alexandra Balafrej and discuss opportunities to promote Gibraltar as a destination for Moroccans participating in programmes supported by the Council.

Our engagement with Moroccan universities continues, building on the MOU signed between the University of Gibraltar and Abdelmalek Essaâdi University (Université Abdelmalek Essaâdi), Tétouan, Morocco, with the National Museum also developing links with researchers in Morocco.

Madam Speaker, it is equally important that we support initiatives that strengthen ties between our communities and improve opportunities for individuals. During the year, visits were undertaken. One visit that I remember vividly to educational and social projects in northern Morocco, including Houmar Primary School in the Rif Mountains and APEA, the Association of Parents of Autistic Children, a centre in Chefchaouen, which supports autistic children and young people while also promoting women's education and empowerment.

At Houmar Primary School, I saw firsthand the positive impact of the work undertaken by RifCom and its volunteers in providing educational facilities and opportunities for children in a really remote mountain community. The resilience and commitment of both pupils and teachers were truly inspiring and demonstrated the importance of continued support for such initiatives.

At the APEA Centre in Chefchaouen, I witnessed the remarkable work being carried out to support autistic children and young adults through education, training and employment opportunities. I was also pleased to learn of the progress being made in programmes supporting women returning to education, pursuing university studies and developing income-generating initiatives. These projects demonstrate the positive impact that Gibraltar's charitable and community organisations continue to have in communities across the strait. Such initiatives demonstrate that the relationship between Gibraltar and Morocco is not confined to official exchanges but is increasingly reflected in meaningful cooperation between our respective communities.

I was pleased to support the Gibraltar Photographic Society's 60th anniversary exhibition in Tétouan as part of a programme of workshops and public engagement. Preparatory work is also underway regarding Gibraltar's participation in future editions of the Festival de Cine Africano de Tarifa-Tánger (FCAT), one of the most important cultural platforms linking Europe and Africa, which will provide valuable opportunities to strengthen Gibraltar's cultural presence within the region and develop new partnerships with the creative industries.

Madam Speaker, the strong links developed between Gibraltar and Moroccan partners continue to facilitate practical cooperation in the field of biodiversity, conservation and environmental education, creating networks which benefit both sides of the Strait and support our shared commitment to protecting the unique natural heritage of this region. Calpe 2027 will celebrate this.

Madam Speaker, the initiative of the Government to have the relationship with Morocco as a formal part of our Ministerial portfolio has clearly proved a resounding success. I am encouraged by the progress that continues to be made in this relationship. The many links established over the past few years are producing tangible results and opening new avenues for cooperation and indeed for investment. We will continue to build on these foundations, promoting greater understanding between our communities and identifying new opportunities that benefit both Gibraltar and our Moroccan neighbours. Through these initiatives, Gibraltar continues to evolve, to strengthen its role as a bridge between Europe and Africa, fostering cooperation, friendship and mutual respect across the strait.

Madam Speaker, I extend this aspect of my portfolio to supporting Gibraltar's Moroccan community. I have held clinics and many meetings with members of the community and my team goes out of its way to assist them. In fact, at this moment, Madam Speaker, I am not sure whether to support Morocco or England in the World Cup, I must admit.

A number of guidance notes in English and Arabic in connection with the forthcoming Treaty changes have been published by the Ministry and work continues in this respect. Madam Speaker, let me reassure you that despite the changes that the Treaty is bringing to the old ceilings, new and exciting connections await.

Madam Speaker, I have continued to hold town hall meetings with my South District constituency. The level of participation continues to be encouraging with residents demonstrating a strong interest in the future and well-being of the South District. A number of concerns raised at meetings have been addressed while others continue to be pursued with the relevant agencies. I continue to find these meetings productive and rewarding. They reinforce the importance of maintaining close contact with the community and provide an effective means of ensuring that voices are heard and reflected in the work of the Government. I am grateful to all those residents who continue to participate and contribute so positively to these discussions.

I turn now, Madam Speaker, to traffic and transport. The team from my Ministry continues to work hard on the difficult task of improving circulation, protecting parking and at the same time encouraging alternative forms of transport. This is not easy and people may not realise the lengths to which we go. Roadworks, for example, cause disruption but if we did not do all that we do in the background I assure you that the disturbance and inconvenience during works would be much, much worse.

We continue to look at improvements and are considering a number of steps to improve traffic flow and not just because of what might be expected from a more fluid border. This may include an enhanced bus service from the border, park and ride in the border area and at certain times restricting large vehicles and introducing no-stop areas.

As part of our ongoing work to remove congestion and increase existing parking availability we rolled out the Derelict Vehicle Cleaning Campaign, a coordinated effort to remove abandoned and non-roadworthy vehicles from our streets and relieve pressure on parking areas.

Gibraltar currently has over 45,000 registered vehicles but only 14,654 public parking spaces, hence the importance of our Zone Parking Scheme, a scheme that is being actively reviewed. Enforcement teams have also identified that 18% of vehicles are without a valid MOT or were without a valid MOT, increasing the likelihood of them being left unused or abandoned in public areas. To address these, the Ministry for Transport, DVLD, Gibraltar Car Parks, the RGP and Britannia have been working together to identify, tag and remove derelict vehicles across all parking zones. Recent legislative changes now make it faster and easier to remove vehicles from the public highway. We continue urging all vehicle owners to book it or scrap it and so support the ongoing efforts.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Transport has published a number of updates to legislation, including an update to the definition of cycle lanes, allowing cyclists to use saluting battery and changes to the red line zones.

The Ministry continues to review bus routes, usage and public feedback, with the bus service probably now at the best level it has ever been. We have increased the frequency of buses for Route 2, and we will next week be introducing a new route, combining Routes 3 and 8 into a new Route 6 and increasing frequency to every 15 minutes. Later this year, we will be introducing a new shuttle linking St Joseph's School area to Europa Road, which will benefit residents and visitors to the South District. We also now have a beach shuttle service for the second successive year.

The bus's environmental profile continues to improve, with the continued use of lower emission HVO fuel and with 6 new electric buses for the Upper Town due in September. Hydrogenated vegetable fuel, vegetable oil, HVO reduces carbon emissions by 90%. So, in the past year, the buses have reduced emissions by the equivalent of about 750 tonnes of carbon dioxide.

A tender will now issue for the replacement of the larger buses also with electric vehicles, which will reduce emissions even more and help achieve our air quality targets. A new and much improved ticketing system will go live in September, providing a better service to users and more accessible statistics. The bus company is also investing in its drivers, with a large emphasis on customer care and an improved training scheme for new drivers.

The Ministry of Transport continues to work with the Gibraltar Taxi Association to improve the service. There is now a dedicated airport service with a minimum of 5 cars from the time of arrival of each plane up to at least 90 minutes thereafter. The association has established a taxi attendance service at the airport to cover all arrivals.

Work continues on the taxi service itself, with the introduction of new city service taxi licences to increase the number of cars working as taxis and to improve customer service at the taxi ranks. I must once again thank the Gibraltar Taxi Association, so ably led by its president, Louis Debono, for their collaboration as we jointly continue to improve the service. Perhaps one of the most exciting developments on this front has been the introduction of the new electric London style black cabs. The successful introduction of these vehicles, soon to be 21 in number, has delivered a number of important benefits.

As electric vehicles, they will reduce emissions and improve air quality. The classic London design will also enhance the distinctly British character of our town, strengthening Gibraltar's appeal as a unique tourist destination. In addition, these taxis offer full wheelchair accessibility. This is a major step forward in improving transport inclusivity and builds on the efforts of both the Government and the GTA to expand accessibility in our public transport network. From 1 or 2 taxis with wheelchair access just a year or so ago, we now have over 20.

The saluting battery, *La Bateria*, has been designated as a shared use area, allowing pedestrians, cyclists and users of personal light electric transporters, PLETS, or scooters, to travel freely along its full length. Some expressed concerns at the time, but it is working well. This initiative is part of the Sustainable Traffic, Transport and Parking Plan introduced by my predecessor, the Hon. Paul Balban, the STTPP, and of the Gibraltar Active Travel Strategy, aiming to encourage more sustainable and inclusive modes of transport. Shared spaces provide valuable recreational and commuting opportunities, particularly for children, the elderly and people with disabilities, within a traffic-free environment. Whether it is learning to ride a bike or enjoying a peaceful walk, such areas support healthy and active lifestyles.

This year, we will concentrate efforts on pedestrians and on encouraging walking or wheelchair use over other modes of transport. This will build on other actions taken in the past few months, including 2 new light-controlled crossings at busy points at Queensway and Line Wall Road outside the Youth Centre. The initiative follows stakeholder and public feedback and aligns with the objectives of both the Active Travel Strategy and the STTPP, reaffirming our commitment to a safer, more pedestrian-friendly Gibraltar.

We have introduced new speed-camming measures at South Barrack Ramp, improving road and pedestrian safety, as well as having a new level crossing point, improving accessibility for users in the area. We have also introduced further traffic and parking measures along Cemetery Road, enhancing accessibility, safety and functionality.

Other initiatives include the installation of new demarcation and visibility bollards at Keightley Way Tunnel and new road markings outside all schools, with the words School Zone clearly demarcated on approach roads. All this forms part of the Government's wider programme to enhance road safety and promote sustainable modes of transport. It aligns with our objectives and the STTPP, incidentally, is being reviewed to take account of the Treaty-related changes, reinforcing the commitment to create a safer, more accessible, pedestrian-friendly urban environment.

This year we will be introducing way-finding signs to encourage walking and improving pedestrian safety with more light-controlled crossings, such as at the bottom of Europa Road, and a new pedestrian walkway at Europa Advance Road, a popular but dangerous route for walkers and joggers.

We will continue to ensure that drivers are aware of cyclists and will introduce new cycling infrastructure, with requirements for all new development schemes, public or private, to include this. New cycle lanes will extend the present ones and will include enhanced cycling infrastructure in Waterport and the Frontier area and promotion of alternative routes, as well as introducing pedal-ready courses in cooperation with our schools. I must here thank the Sustainable Transport Action Group for their positive engagement always.

PLETs, Madam Speaker, seem to be controversial, but are better for the urban environment than cars or motorcycles as they do not emit fumes. However, it is important that they are regulated. We have introduced a registration process and in the few short months since we did so, already over 800 have registered. We will now be further enforcing the 25 km per hour speed limit with new speed cameras and testing equipment and reducing the speed limit further in some specific cases. We will shortly be legislating to redefine PLETs, taking into account throttle control PLETs in order to enhance safety and we will be introducing powers to remove from the public highway.

Madam Speaker, the Driver and Vehicle Licencing Department, DVLD, has been responding to the changes and initiatives on which we are working. This includes dealing with more requests for vehicle tests and the wide-ranging legislative changes being brought about as a result of the Treaty requiring us to align transport with the EU. In addition, we have just introduced the new Polar Bear IT system to improve the different licencing functions and a veritable digital transformation. We have also improved the CBT service with more slots available and improved instruction. The Personalised Number Plate initiative has also proved very successful and raised important revenue. Work will continue this year on reviewing legislation in order to improve services further.

A new registration system for delivery drivers has been implemented. All drivers must have a minimum standard of appearance and a box with appropriate markings. Drivers are issued with a registration card upon applying and employment status is checked.

A new online system will go live in September which will check and be informed of all employment status changes along with logging further required standards such as food hygiene test training. This initiative has important regulatory, safety and public health implications.

Madam Speaker, in order to keep up with all these unprecedented improvements in the management of traffic and transport and in order to be able to meet new requirements following treaty implementation we are increasing the complement of transport inspectors who are now being managed directly under my Ministry. To assist them in their work they will have new CCTV cameras for enforcement of the air taxi service and other infringements of law. They will be provided with new tachograph equipment and training for treaty compliance and will have a new base by the border.

Other traffic related initiatives have included intelligent cameras on Queensway to collect data on vehicles on the public highway including checking for vehicles without MOT which led to a record number of MOT bookings. We have also acquired new speed cameras to allow issuing of on-the-spot speeding fines to local and foreign vehicles.

In consultation with businesses in the area new arrangements have been put in place at North Mole Road to resolve long standing issues with HGVs idling and blocking the road. While electric vehicle registration is increasing in numbers while remaining at 2.8%, the registration of hybrids has increased by 5 points to 34.3% and of petrol and diesel vehicles together has decreased by 5 points. This is mildly encouraging but we will redouble our efforts to increase these percentages including by continuing to lead by example as in the electric taxis and buses and the Government fleet and by providing more electric vehicle charging points such as we have recently provided on the ground floor of Midtown Coach and Car Park, in Devils Tower Car Park and at Europa Point and Ragged Staff.

Madam Speaker, moving on to the Technical Services Department or TSD, the department has continued to provide technical support to Government Ministries and departments on a wide range of construction and traffic related matters. The Highway Maintenance Programme has once again been successful with ongoing repairs to roads, paths and retaining walls. The most significant works carried out include disability ramps, speed bumps and pothole repairs in areas including the Upper Rock and a summarising list form in the published version of my speech. This year we will see a continuation of our road surfacing scheme.

Over the last few years, a significant number of our roads have been surfaced, and this has progressed further during the last year with over 7,250 square metres of our roads resurfaced. The department is currently working on preparing the necessary technical documentation for this year's highways resurfacing programme.

Funding in the order of £1.5 million has been proposed in this Bill for highways maintenance and resurfacing projects reflecting the Government's commitment to ensure our road network is kept to a high standard.

In order to reduce the impact of road closures as much as possible these are avoided during peak times where possible and after hours and weekend work is a condition that is normally imposed on contractors so as to minimise inconvenience to the public. I hold regular coordinating meetings with both public and private agencies to ensure greater cooperation and minimise disruption in all infrastructure works.

With regards to coastal engineering works the TSD continues to monitor and carry out maintenance and repair works as and when required. Most recently works have been completed at Camp Bay following damage caused to the small pier following severe storms. The department also continues to provide advice to developers and the DPC on all aspects of coastal engineering and is currently working closely with the developers of the east side.

The department has engaged on a major project to maintain the catch fences located on the east side to the south of Sandy Bay. This is a major scheme which follows the removal of rocks

caught by the catch fences over the years. The latest phase with a value in excess of £500,000 aims to repair and upgrade the catch fences located in this area to improve safety. While rock falls are unfortunately something that we have to live with in Gibraltar they will have been happening for at least 6 million years — the department continues to monitor the risks and takes immediate action whenever necessary.

During the past year the infrastructure section of the department has continued to maintain the public sewerage network. With relining of the main trunk sewer within the city wall now complete the section focuses attention on the repair of pipe networks feeding into the main trunk sewer in order to improve the overall performance of the system. This included the repair and re-routing of lateral connections, the repair and refurbishment of defective manholes and the replacement of defective pipe work. As part of its ongoing monitoring of the network an area of defective sewer was identified in the area by Jumpers which was causing sinkholes to develop in a localised area of Rosia Road. In order to deal with this a major new access shaft was constructed to intercept the main sewer. This access shaft holds a challenging civil engineering project as the crown of the main sewer is close to 8 metres deep. The project was completed successfully and has provided an improved access point to carry out further remedial works if necessary.

In addition to structural improvements the department has also carried out a number of cleansing projects removing material compromising the hydraulic capacity of the network such as wipes. This is particularly noticeable in the ongoing maintenance of road galleys which has seen a significant reduction in local flooding following periods of heavy rain. The condition and upkeep of Gibraltar's main sewer and storm water drainage networks are a top priority and the department will therefore this year be continuing its major desilting and cleansing works of the sewer network and will carry out further upgrading works.

It must be noted that all the work being carried out by the infrastructure section of the Technical Services Department is happening in parallel with the new East Side Sewage Transfer Scheme which is a major project to future proof Gibraltar's critical sewage infrastructure. The maintenance and upkeep of the sewerage network are considered critical and given top priority regardless of the allegations of the social media naysayers.

I would take this opportunity Madam Speaker to thank the TSD on-call officers for their hard work and commitment during those times in the past year when Gibraltar suffered from storms with high winds and very heavy rain. It is thanks to their hard work and dedication while most of us were at home that the impact of these storms is not greater on both our sewage and road networks.

Madam Speaker I repeat what I said last year. The Technical Services Department is one of those Government departments that is rarely in the limelight but whose officers work tirelessly behind the scenes to deliver on their responsibilities maintaining public infrastructure and supporting and providing technical advice across Government Ministries and departments.

Madam Speaker, before I take the attention of the House to education may I update you on the project to create a National Theatre for Gibraltar. While this is a project of the National Theatre Foundation, I can nevertheless share that the funding for the project has been all but secured, a preferred bidder for the tender nominated and that work on the ground is expected to commence shortly. I will be working closely with my friend and colleague the Minister for Culture and with Gibraltar's incredible performing arts community to finally make this a most welcome reality.

And so to education, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, John Major once said,

> The first role of any Government is to leave something better for the next generation than your generation inherited.

In education this Government has succeeded for a most significant legacy undoubtedly is the result of our revolution in education.

Actually, Madam Speaker, this reminds me of something that one of my childhood heroes Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise said in season 2, episode 4 of the original series:

> In every revolution there is a man with a vision.

Madam Speaker, the vision and the revolution continue. Indeed, Madam Speaker, education remains one of the most significant investments that any government can make in the future of its community. Everyday thousands of children and young people enter our schools with different experiences, strengths, aspirations and needs. Our ambition extends far beyond academic outcomes.

We believe that education is about developing the whole child. It is about nurturing children's emotional, social and personal development alongside the development of knowledge, understanding, skills, independence, character and a lifelong love of learning. We believe that when children feel safe, valued, respected and supported they are best placed to engage with learning, develop confidence and realise their potential.

This, Madam Speaker, is where the money goes. This is why we continue to invest in welcoming, safe and inclusive school communities in which every child feels valued, every voice is heard, every learner experiences a genuine sense of belonging and everyone is given the opportunity to flourish.

We know that children and young people thrive when they feel understood and encouraged, when they develop positive relationships with the adults around them, when they are supported through challenge and when their individual strengths are recognised and nurtured. Educational success is therefore viewed not solely through examination results but through the development of confident, resilient, compassionate and capable young people who are equipped with the knowledge, skills and values they need to flourish in life, contribute positively to the community and become the parents, the workforce and the leaders upon whom Gibraltar's future will depend.

This philosophy continues to shape every aspect of my work in education and of the work of the Department of Education. Throughout the past year we have continued to strengthen support for children and families, invest in our workforce, modernise our education service, improve our school environments and further develop partnerships across Government and the wider community. The initiatives I will now outline demonstrate not simply what has been achieved during the past year and our commitment for the next, but the education system that this Government continues to build. Madam Speaker, worth every single penny.

Madam Speaker, this year we continue to strengthen our proactive approach to promoting positive mental health and emotional well-being across all educational settings. Our focus remains on equipping staff with the knowledge, confidence and practical strategies required to support children and young people experiencing social, emotional and mental health needs, including those arising from adverse childhood experiences, trauma and other vulnerabilities.

A comprehensive programme of professional learning has been delivered throughout the year, equipping staff with the knowledge, understanding and practical strategies required to safely support children and young people across a wide range of circumstances. Training has focused on strengthening understanding of trauma, bereavement, mental health and emotional well-being while also developing expertise in low arousal approaches, nurture provision, safeguarding, including child sexual exploitation, and the impact of screen time and social media on children's well-being.

Our collaboration with the Royal Gibraltar Police through Operation Encompass Gibraltar continues to be an important element of our safeguarding arrangements. Timely information sharing enables schools to provide discreet, sensitive and immediate support to children affected by incidents of abuse, helping them to feel safe, understood and supported from the moment they arrive at school. This allows schools to respond sensitively and provide overt or discreet

support as appropriate, recognising that children may arrive at the school carrying experiences that are not immediately visible to those around them.

The Teaching and Learning Centre, the TLC, continues to play a vital role in supporting children and young people whose needs cannot currently be met within mainstream education. Strengthened through the addition of a senior teacher, the provision continues to evolve in response to need, supporting young people experiencing anxiety, trauma, emotional distress and other complex circumstances. Alongside the core provision, TLC outreach continues to work successfully with pupils in mainstream schools, enabling many young people to access timely intervention whilst maintaining links with their own school community.

Our attendance strategy has continued to develop. By strengthening attendance systems and introducing additional specialist support, we have enhanced our ability to support children experiencing emotionally based school avoidance and other attendance related challenges.

This year also saw the incredibly successful launch of Targeted Youth Support, a joint initiative between the Department of Education and the Gibraltar Youth Service. The programme provides personalised support for young people who have become disengaged from education or who require additional guidance to overcome personal, social or emotional barriers and help young people reconnect positively with education and their future.

Alongside this, we have established a new pre-16 pathway based at the Gibraltar College for a small cohort of Year 11 learners whose education has been significantly affected by trauma, illness or other complex circumstances. Through highly personalised programmes of learning and dedicated pastoral support, we aim to re-engage these young people with education, rebuild confidence and create meaningful pathways towards future learning and employment.

Madam Speaker, safeguarding continues to remain central to the culture of every educational setting. We have strengthened safeguarding practice through ongoing training, professional dialogue and enhanced inter-agency working. A significant milestone has been the introduction of bespoke safeguarding training for all our SNLSAs, recognising the important role these colleagues play in supporting and protecting children every day.

Our safeguarding arrangements continue to be strengthened through the close partnership working with the Care Agency, the Royal Gibraltar Police and the GHA. Regular strategic meetings, participation in child protection processes, fostering and adoption panels, early intervention work and implementation of the managing allegations framework all contribute to ensuring that safeguarding remains everyone's responsibility and that children receive coordinated, timely and effective support whenever concerns arise.

Madam Speaker, there have been some press reports over the last couple of days that have misinterpreted the position of the Department of Education in relation to safeguarding following a recent conviction in our courts. Our safeguarding has already been reviewed and approaches strengthened even before that conviction. It must be remembered that these horrendous events happened quite some years ago and before a later case of grooming which already led to internal review leading to enhanced training and awareness as I have described. We are confident that as a result we are doing all and will do everything possible to protect those in our care from such horrendous abuse. Even then we will continue to raise awareness, act promptly and to constantly question and review whether we are doing enough to safeguard the children and young people in our schools, which is our utmost priority.

The Annual Gibraltar School's Mental Health Festival continues to grow in both scale and effort. It brings together children, families, educators and professionals to promote positive mental health, challenge stigma and encourage open conversations about well-being.

The Department remains committed to ensuring that appropriate provision exists for children and young people with the most complex needs. At present its immediate focus is on strengthening and relocating the TLC to expand its provision while in close association with the Royal Gibraltar Police, the Care Agency and others, continuing to keep under review the range of alternative educational pathways and specialist interventions required to meet current and future

needs. Importantly, we will develop a more strategic approach to supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

Many families, Madam Speaker, will welcome the introduction of a comprehensive SEND framework that brings together education, health and social care through a coordinated, person-centred approach. Long-term plans that clearly identify needs, set agreed outcomes, allocate responsibilities and provide regular review will help ensure children and young people receive consistent support throughout their education and into adulthood. Such a SEND framework will provide greater clarity for families, strengthen accountability across services and give children and young people the best opportunity to reach their potential. I commit to this significant and lasting investment in Gibraltar's future.

Madam Speaker, the well-being of children is closely connected to the well-being of the adults who support them. To quote Pope Leo XIV, two teachers educate with a smile, and their goal is to awaken smiles in the depths of their students' souls. We will therefore continue to invest in the vitally important matter of staff well-being, recognising that teachers and support staff are best placed to support others when they themselves feel safe, valued, supported and professionally equipped. Alongside training and professional development, more opportunity than ever will be provided that promotes well-being, resilience and mutual support amongst colleagues across the education service. It is imperative that teachers are and feel totally safe and protected in their working environment with protocols and support in place always to ensure that this is so.

Madam Speaker, as in previous years, the number of children and young people presenting with additional needs has continued to increase. We have continued to work closely with schools and partner agencies to anticipate future demand, carefully planning our staffing, specialist provision and educational environments so that support evolves alongside these changing needs. A significant milestone this year has been the opening of a new learning support facility at St Bernard's Upper Primary School.

Learning support facilities are now established across all but one Government school, as this September we see the extension of our LSF provision to St Bernard's Lower Primary. We remain firmly committed to the principle of early intervention. Working closely with colleagues from the GHA, we continue to identify children's needs at the earliest opportunity so that appropriate support can be planned from the beginning of their educational journey.

This commitment is reflected in the relocation of Early Birds Nursery to its newly refurbished premises, providing an enhanced learning environment for our youngest learners. At St Martin's School, investment in strengthening senior leadership has strengthened capacity, enhanced communication with families, very important, further improved home-school relationships and supported the continued development of high quality specialist provision. Alongside this, planning has continued for the next phase of the school development, ensuring that future accommodation evolves in line with increasing pupil numbers and increasingly complex needs.

As specialist provision has expanded across Gibraltar, our outreach and in-reach arrangements have become increasingly well-established. This collaborative approach has strengthened partnership between schools, supported smoother transitions and enabled specialist expertise to be shared more effectively. We have continued to strengthen specialist staffing across schools through the recruitment and deployment of additional teachers and SNLSAs.

Professional development remains central to our inclusive practice. Teachers, SNLSAs, SENCOs and other specialist staff have engaged in an extensive programme of learning focused on inclusive education, emotional well-being and evidence-informed practice. The introduction of specialist training in supporting emotional regulation, self-awareness and well-being has provided schools with additional practical approaches that can benefit a wide range of learners, including children with neurodiverse needs, those who have experienced trauma and those who present with communication differences.

Our educational psychology service continues to provide schools with this expertise. Two members of staff have commenced their educational psychology training in the United Kingdom, completing the first year of their doctorate this summer. This represents an important investment

in developing future expertise and ensuring the long-term sustainability of this highly specialised service.

We have continued to refine systems that support consistent practice across schools, including the review of SEN registers, timelines of SEN involvement and individual pupil profiles, together with enhanced transition arrangements. Support continues to be determined by the individual need rather than diagnosis. Our approach remains firmly centred on understanding every child as an individual, recognising their strengths alongside the areas in which they require support and providing personalised learning experiences that enable them to participate, progress and thrive.

Many well-established aspects of our provision continue to make a significant difference to children and families. These include annual dyslexia screening for all Year 4 pupils, educational psychology drop-in sessions for parents, continued investment in assistive technology and augmentative communication, person-centred planning and robust examination access arrangements. Close partnership working also continues through the SEN Assessment Panel and the Children's Disability Panel.

Through this continued investment in collaborative working we are strengthening both the support available to children today and the long-term capacity of Gibraltar's education system to meet the needs of future generations. No Government ever has done so much as this one in this field as the GSLP Liberal Government. That fact simply cannot be disputed.

Madam Speaker, the strength of any education system depends fundamentally on its people. We remain committed to a culture in which staff feel valued, supported and encouraged to continue developing throughout their careers. The needs of our workforce must continue to be paramount, to evolve positively alongside the changing needs of children, families and our wider community.

Our investment in professional learning therefore seeks to strengthen individual expertise, build collective capacity and ensure that colleagues across the service are equipped to respond confidently and effectively to an increasingly complex educational landscape. We will continue to invest in training that responds both to service-wide priorities and to the particular needs identified by individual schools and educational settings. We seek to combine broad opportunities for learning and professional exchange with more targeted development for particular groups of staff, helping to ensure that key knowledge and expertise reaches the colleagues best placed to apply them in their work.

We will continue to support early career teachers through a structured two-year induction programme led by schools and strengthened through mentoring, professional learning and contributions from experienced colleagues across the service. This is fundamental to building confidence, developing strong professional practice and helping new teachers establish a lasting sense of belonging within their profession.

We will continue to explore opportunities to strengthen professional development throughout, supporting schools to develop leadership capacity in ways that respond to their own context and needs. Alongside professional development, staff well-being remains a vitally important part of our investment in people.

The work undertaken across education is deeply rewarding, but it is also highly demanding and can be emotionally complex. Colleagues are often supporting children and families through challenging circumstances, managing competing responsibilities and responding to needs that continue to evolve. We recognise that those who care for and support others must themselves feel safe, supported, respected and valued. Our approach to staff well-being therefore extends beyond individual initiatives. We will continue to encourage open professional dialogue, supportive leadership, opportunities for reflection and access to specialist support whenever required.

The Government well-being team continues to provide valuable support to colleagues across education, while professional learning in areas such as mental health first aid further strengthens the capacity of staff to support one another. We also recognise the importance of listening to our workforce. Constructive engagement with school leaders, the whole staff and the Trade Unions

that represent colleagues helps us to understand concerns, identify opportunities for improvement and work through complex issues.

We will continue to work closely with colleagues in the industrial relations team to respond to queries and claims, seek to anticipate and address potential issues where possible, understand different perspectives and work towards positive resolution. While agreements may not always be immediate, respectful dialogue, a willingness to learn and a shared commitment to constructive engagement remain fundamental to building trust and sustaining positive professional relationships.

The Department will continue to review and strengthen the systems and structures that support our workforce. This will include improving recruitment processes, developing clearer professional pathways, reviewing roles and responsibilities and working with colleagues across Government and the Trade Unions on matters relating to pay, conditions and career development. I want staff across our service to remain curious, reflective and willing to learn, to feel confident in sharing ideas and able to openly question and challenge established practice and to know that their expertise and contributions are valued, because they most certainly are. By investing in our staff, we invest directly in children and young people.

We will continue to review and develop our curriculum and qualification pathways so that learners are provided with a range of opportunities through which they can experience success, build confidence and prepare for the next stage in their lives. Strong foundations in literacy and numeracy remain fundamental. We will continue to explore ways of strengthening the teaching and learning of mathematics across all sectors, while our work with external expertise is informing the development of a service-wide approach to improving English.

Curriculum working parties will continue to provide important opportunities for teachers to collaborate across schools and sectors. Alongside the continuing work of our Mathematics and English groups, working parties in Spanish and in science have further strengthened opportunities for professional dialogue. These structures recognise and draw upon the considerable expertise that exists within our schools, enabling practitioners to contribute directly to the continuing development of curriculum and practice.

We have also continued to refine the ways in which children's learning and development are recorded and communicated internally and in communication with families. At the Gibraltar College we continue to develop a curriculum that responds to the diverse interests, strengths and aspirations of young people and to the future needs of the community. The continued development of vocational and technical pathways is central.

Our aim is to ensure that young people are able to access meaningful routes that enable them to build knowledge, develop practical and transferable skills and progress successfully into further study, training and employment. The introduction of additional vocational qualifications continues to broaden the range of pathways available, and that high quality education must provide multiple routes through which young people can achieve, progress and flourish.

We continue to support vocational learning beyond our own school and college through partnerships with specialist providers. This includes continued support for the Gibraltar Academy of Music and Performing Arts and for vocational opportunities in hair and beauty, helping to ensure that young people can access learning experiences that connect their interests and talents with recognised qualifications.

Our commitment to meaningful pathways also extends to those young people for whom conventional routes have not proved successful. I have already mentioned the new focused pre-16 pathway into the Gibraltar College to help young people rebuild confidence, restore engagement with learning and help them begin to see positive possibilities for their future. This work complements the wider development of the Targeted Youth Support programme that I already mentioned.

While on the College, Madam Speaker, I want to publicly congratulate Julian Felice for having just been named International Exam Officer of the Year by the National Association of Exam Officers in the summer conference at the Oval, as Julian likes to say, *este College mucho College*.

We continue to enhance opportunities for young people with additional needs beyond compulsory schooling. The positive partnership between the College and Saint Bernadette's continues to extend access to appropriate College courses for young people who can benefit from them, further strengthening the range of post-16 opportunities available in our community.

Madam Speaker, as technology and society continue to evolve, our curriculum must evolve with them. Artificial intelligence is already reshaping the way people learn, work and interact with information. We are therefore carefully exploring and considering how AI can be used responsibly across our education service, as a strategic tool to help analyse data and inform planning; as a professional tool to support teachers in strengthening pedagogy and responding more effectively to individual learning needs; and as an increasingly important area of learning for children and young people themselves. Our learners will need to understand not only how to use AI tools effectively but also how to question their outputs, recognise their limitations and risks, think critically about the information they generate and use emerging technologies ethically and responsibly.

We also want to create opportunities for young people to move beyond being users of technology and develop the knowledge and skills required to shape, create and innovate it. This work must be approached thoughtfully. The opportunities presented by AI sit alongside important considerations related to safeguarding, data protection, academic integrity, equity and the continuing importance of human relationships, professional judgement and independent thought.

Our aim is not to pursue technology for its own sake but to explore how it can be used responsibly to strengthen learning, support our workforce and prepare young people for the world they inherit.

Madam Speaker, children and young people do not experience their lives through strict boundaries. Their needs are often interconnected, and the most effective support is therefore built around the child and family rather than around organisational structures. Families are central to our work. Parents and carers know their children in ways that no professional can, and strong, respectful relationships between home and school can make a profound difference to a child's experience of education. We will continue to encourage schools to work closely with families, to listen carefully to their perspectives and to develop constructive relationships built on communication, trust and a shared commitment to the child.

The Department of Education continues to work closely with colleagues in many agencies, a multitude of charities and NGOs and other services and organisations that support children, young people and families. We will continue to work closely with colleagues at the GHA to strengthen coordinated support for children and young people. Our collaboration with public health also continues across a wide range of areas, including the National Height and Weight Measurement Programme, vaccination programmes and the Screen Time Campaign.

The Department's partnership with the Gibraltar Youth Service continues to grow. The work reflects the importance of meeting young people where they are, building trust and helping them to identify their own strengths and possibilities. We will continuously review processes, strengthen protocols and explore opportunities to make joint working more coordinated and effective.

A strong educational system depends not only on what happens in classrooms but also on the systems, processes and infrastructure that support the people working within it. We will continue to invest in technology, information systems and organisational processes that enable schools to work more effectively. We have continued to invest in hardware that supports learning and teaching across our schools, including interactive technology, desktop computers, iPads and other digital resources that enable teachers to broaden learning experiences and provide children and young people with opportunities to develop confidence in using technology. Relevant to the use of technology has been the very successful introduction of phone pouches in Westside and Bayside.

Work continues towards implementation of a management information system across the school, with a more integrated approach to pupil information. Alongside this, we continue to strengthen our approach to data protection and information governance.

We will continue to develop policies and procedures that provide greater clarity and consistency across our schools and the wider Department. This work helps colleagues understand expectations, supports fair and consistent decision-making and strengthens the organisational foundations upon which effective practice depends.

Madam Speaker, the environments in which children learn, and staff work matter. Our buildings must be safe, welcoming and inclusive places. We will continue to invest, as we have in an unprecedented manner, in maintaining, improving and developing the physical environments that support them. Our investment in the education estate continues to include both major strategic developments and a wide programme of smaller improvements across individual schools.

The continued development of St Martin's School remains a priority. Work is progressing in its extension and increasing the space available for classroom, specialist rooms, hygiene facility, staff facilities and other essential provisions. Work which will be completed in time for the start of term this September.

The development has been undertaken in close consultation with the school, with learning from previous education projects informing the design and use of space. The development of additional accommodation at St Joseph's School is already well underway. This will be followed by the upgrading of existing learning spaces, with the overall programme designed to bring the accommodation into line with the upgrades and refurbishment already delivered across other schools.

The development of the new Gibraltar College at Europa Point represents one of the most significant strategic investments in the future of education and training in Gibraltar. Planning for the new College provides an opportunity to think beyond the replacing of an existing building and to consider how the physical environment can support the future development of further education, vocational learning, technical education and wider pathways for young people and learners. The new College will provide flexible, modern and purposeful spaces that support an evolving curriculum and create new possibilities.

Construction is well underway with close involvement by the school and regular meetings which I chair, with continued progress enabling the vision for the new College to become increasingly tangible, and we will open next year.

The continued programme of air conditioning installation has also progressed to practical completion. This has become particularly important given the rising temperatures across Europe and the changes to the academic calendar. This change, while initially controversial, will, I am certain, make for more comfortable and more efficient use of school time and will bring overall benefits to learners. The value of this investment has been clearly demonstrated during recent periods of extreme heat in Europe. At a time when high temperatures have disrupted education and led to hundreds of school closures elsewhere in Europe, Gibraltar schools have been able to remain open and continue functioning. Our investment in air conditioning has therefore provided us with an important level of resilience in the face of increasingly challenging climatic conditions.

Protocols for dealing with rising temperatures when air conditioning fails are also being developed. A range of additional work continues across our schools, including improvements of playground surfaces and specialist outdoor areas.

At Bayside and Westside, significant work has been undertaken to extend the telephone infrastructure, strengthening internal communications which will greatly assist the staff and supporting wider emergency response arrangements, and a new improved Wi-Fi system, which I promised the senior students when I met them at the time of introducing the phone pouches, is being installed. Particular attention continues to be given to specialist equipment used by children and young people with additional needs.

We will ensure that Gibraltar's educational environments continue to evolve, providing spaces in which children and young people feel that they belong and are given every opportunity to flourish.

The school population of Gibraltar continues to grow with further growth predicted, particularly in the north, following the allocation of Hassan Centenary Terraces. Therefore, I am pleased to announce that we are in the process of designing and planning for an additional floor on each of Notre Dame and St Anne's Schools in order to be able to accommodate more children. We will also extend the scope, resources and size of our TLC provision to be able to cater for children who need to be taught in these facilities.

In relation to specialised supported needs education such as provided at St Martin's School, we are predicting an increase from just over 100 children in recent years to around 250 in 10 years' time. Therefore, I can now further announce that planning and design work is advanced with the intention of building a new upper school to St Martin's to cater for pupils to the age of 18. More details will be announced in due course.

Madam Speaker, we want every child and young person to experience success. That success will look different for different learners. We are rightly proud of the academic and vocational achievements of Gibraltar's young people. Each year pupils work towards qualifications that open doors to further study, training and employment. We also recognise that examination results represent only one moment within a much larger and longer educational journey. Behind every set of results is an individual story, and we remain committed to supporting young people whose results may not initially enable them to progress as they had hoped, helping them to consider alternative pathways and continue moving forwards.

Careers education, information, advice and guidance help young people understand the opportunities available to them, reflect on their strengths and interests and make informed and ambitious decisions as to their futures.

Our annual Future Pathways event will continue to provide pupils with a dedicated time to engage in meaningful conversations about their aspirations. For many young people, the next stage of the journey will involve further or higher education. Government's continued investment in scholarships represents a significant commitment to Gibraltar's young people and to the future of our community.

Residency requirements have been reviewed and increased to support the prudent allocation of funds to eligible individuals and the long-term sustainability of the scholarship system. I am grateful to the Gibraltar International Bank which has stepped in with ways of providing alternative finance to support students when their residential status does not yet qualify them for a scholarship.

Alongside the provision of financial support, we have introduced a feedback mechanism to actively seek the views of scholarship recipients about their experiences of studying away from Gibraltar and the support and processes associated with their awards. The return of the Washington Programme will once again open new opportunities for widening the experience.

Further and higher education are of course not the only routes to successful and fulfilling futures. Our ambition is not to direct every young person towards the same destination but to help each of them identify and pursue a pathway that reflects their strengths, interests, circumstances and aspirations.

Education must never stand still and with me here, it never will. We must remain open to new ideas, willing to reflect critically on our practice and prepared to adapt where change can improve the experiences and opportunities available. Continuous improvement does not mean change for its own sake. It means listening carefully, drawing on evidence and professional expertise, learning from experience and being prepared to ask and be asked whether we can do things better. It also means recognising and building on the considerable strengths that already exist across our schools and wider education service.

I see these strengths during my many visits to the schools where I see for myself the dedication, quality and enthusiasm of staff and the joy and engagement of the pupils in their day-to-day or

special activities such as school concerts or sporting events. Our greatest expertise lies within our own service. By creating opportunities for colleagues to share effective practice, question and challenge, learn from one another and contribute to wider development, we build on our collective capacity and strengthen the education system as a whole.

As we look ahead, we will continue to review our provision, strengthen the use of evidence and information, explore emerging opportunities and respond to areas of growing need. We will do that with ambition but also with care, protecting what works well, investing where development is needed and ensuring that change remains purposeful and centred on the children, young people, families and colleagues it is intended to serve. We will continue to ask questions, listen, reflect and develop, always seeking to make what is already a strong education service stronger.

Education is one of the most important investments any government can make and that is why we invest so much in education. Today's children and young people will become tomorrow's parents, workforce and leaders. They will inherit challenges and opportunities that we cannot yet fully anticipate.

Madam Speaker, in the published version of my speech I include a list of statistics which will illustrate even further the commitment of the Government to continue to ensure that our education system is second to none. It includes additional teachers, increase in teaching establishment, the number of scholarships awarded, the number of additional classrooms that we are providing and so on.

So, Madam Speaker, as I conclude this section, let me send my best wishes to those members of the education team who have retired over the past 12 months and welcome all those with new appointments, be they admin staff, SNLSAs, teachers, head teachers and deputies or education advisors. Let me thank all of those who work in education. These professionals are key elements of our community. Many out there simply do not realise the work that goes into teaching and running schools, working in schools and the responsibilities it involves. I most certainly do, Madam Speaker, and I thank each and every one in the education community for all that they do.

Madam Speaker, I am excited as I enter my 11th year as Minister for Education to continue to work with them as we continue our incredible progress in education in our city. No one will stand in the way because, Madam Speaker, my commitment to education is above all a commitment to people. It is a commitment to every child and young person, to their well-being, their development, their learning and their future. It is a commitment to the families who trust us to support them and to the dedicated colleagues whose skill, care and professionalism make our education system what it is.

My mission remains clear, to continue developing an education service that is ambitious, that values achievement in its broadest sense, that supports its staff and invests in its people and that never loses sight of the individual child or young person at the heart of every decision we make. Because when we invest in our children and young people, we invest in the future of Gibraltar.

Finally, Madam Speaker, I wish to express my thanks to the staff across all my portfolios, including and most especially my amazing personal Ministry staff. Every single one of them is beyond doubt the best Ministry team I have ever had. They look after me, they work hard in support of my many areas of responsibility, and I simply could not do my job without them.

For those out there who decry the work of public service and of public servants, think again. Thanks to Madam Speaker, to my heads of departments and CEOs, to head teachers and senior staff and the staff in every area, in all my departments, my project managers and so many more committed public servants for their hard work every day and for their constant support.

My thanks too to all the schools and the staff who invariably make me feel very welcome in all my visits. To all the staff in the agencies and companies including the GEA and Aquagib and contractors that work to my departments. I want to once again thank the Unions; NASUWT Gibraltar, Unite and GGCA. Over the past year I have been personally involved in constructive discussions with them on a wide range of issues, most of them positively resolved, and I consider that we have an excellent understanding of each other and an excellent working relationship.

To the Chamber of Commerce and GFSB, to all the NGOs who are so committed in what they believe, to all those many citizens appointed to voluntary commissions, boards, working groups and committees for which I am responsible. To those in other departments with whom I have regular contact, such as the staff at No. 6, including the Offices of the Chief Minister and the Deputy Chief Minister, the Chief Secretary who, as I said last year, continues to be a constant source of wisdom, pragmatic problem-solving and strength and his staff, the Financial Secretary and his staff, the Chief Technical Officer and his, the Civil Contingencies Coordinator and his, the Director of Employment and her team, the Director of Personnel and Development and his team, the whole team at Industrial Relations, as well as the Attorney General, the Director of Public Prosecutions and all of the Gibraltar law officers, the Commissioner of Police and officers, the Gibraltar Office in London and the Mission in Brussels, the Press Office, LPS, ITLD and Digital Services, for their constant support and for always being there when I need them.

I want to thank the Hon. Mary Craig, Minister for Nature in His Majesty's Government, for always giving me time and supporting our work in Gibraltar, including her personal message at the launch of our 25-year environment plan.

Thanks of course to the Chief Minister, the Deputy Chief Minister and all my Ministerial colleagues, as well as to you Madam Speaker, the Clerk and the staff of Parliament.

Madam Speaker, last year close to the end of my speech, I said, and I quote Madam Speaker, we are about to show the world just who we are. And you know what Madam Speaker, I think we have done just that. In a world that seems to have receded into conflict we have shown what it is like to negotiate with conviction but with a view to resolution. We have shown the world that we can stand firm on matters of principle and at the same time demolish anachronistic obstacles to conviviality. Oh, that other nations were able to do the same.

Madam Speaker, as many other countries continue to slide down the slippery slope to extreme right-wing policies with their anti-immigrant stance, their climate change denial and their going back on environmental objectives, we in Gibraltar remain progressive and forward-looking and forward-thinking. Long may it be so.

Madam Speaker, I am a socialist and proud to be one. I grew up in a generation that questioned establishment and in many ways I still do. As I look forward to many more years in this House, I remind us all that we are not isolated from world events. That changes in perception and views can often be influenced by fake and social media. I assure you Madam Speaker that I will remain a champion of the people and of these principles wherever they take me.

With a further reminder Madam Speaker that the biggest threat to our community and to the world is not a treaty, not the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, nor even war. It is the heating of our planet. A process that, left unchecked, will make whole regions too hot to sustain human habitation.

Madam Speaker, that great British adventurer Robert Swann once said:

> the greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it.

While we will not in our small community ourselves save our planet, we must play our part. Because we can be an example and because the children and young people to whom we are giving a strong educational grounding and an environmental conscience today may influence decisions far beyond our shores in the future. For there will be influencers, writers, poets, environmentalists or philosophers who in the interconnected world of the future will have their views heard and felt far and wide.

Madam Speaker, I see every day the achievements of our youth within schools, in sports, in dance, music, acting, in tech, reflected in our rich community and its successors, individual and collective, like that magnificent third place in the UK Young Enterprise Finals of the College's My Man Matters team and all those other young people including those mentioned in the Deputy Chief Minister's speech yesterday. So young people, the product of an amazing education system and of wonderful educators, will thrive and make their mark well beyond our shores.

Madam Speaker, seeing the problems faced in many communities elsewhere, let us always remember how blessed and how well we are in Gibraltar, how much has been achieved. *Lo bien que vivimos*, Madam Speaker, as my mum used to say, *por lo que hay que darle*, gracias *a Dios*. People easily forget the gains of the recent past, shift their baseline and demand more. To quote C. S. Lewis:

> it is funny how day by day nothing changes, but when you look back, everything is different.

Let Gibraltar realise that. Let us never forget who we are and where we have come from. Let us recognise and celebrate what we have achieved and build on all that we have, for there are huge possibilities very close on the horizon. Let us continue evolving by embracing the future, the future that this Government has secured for our beloved nation. With that, Madam Speaker, I too commend this Bill to the House. (*Banging on desks*)

Moreover, Madam Speaker, I hereby propose that we adjourn and resume at 3.00 p.m.

Recess

Madam Speaker: We will recess until 3.00 p.m.

The House recessed at 12.41 p.m.