

**Wednesday
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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 23 October 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Energy Costs

1. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Whether he has had discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive on recent trends in energy costs in Northern Ireland. [900732]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): Although energy costs have come down, they remain too high. Our priority is to ensure access to energy is affordable and secure for consumers. That is why this Government have established Great British Energy, which will operate across the whole UK, including Northern Ireland. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy are working together positively on the GB Energy Bill.

Jim Shannon: It is a pleasure to see the Minister in her place and I wish her well; we have been friends for some time. She will be aware of Northern Ireland's unique energy profile: we are more heavily dependent and reliant on oil than other nations in the United Kingdom, with some 68% of people in Northern Ireland using oil. Was that taken into consideration when the Government determined to cut the winter fuel allowance? What discussions were had with the Northern Ireland Executive in relation to doing so?

Fleur Anderson: I am aware that two thirds of Northern Ireland's homes use oil. The decision to means test winter fuel payments was not a decision the Government wished to make, but a result of the Conservative's £22 billion black hole. In Northern Ireland, the Executive have decided that winter fuel payments will continue to be paid to households where someone receives pension credit. I have checked the figures; in Northern Ireland it is estimated that over 26,000 people could be eligible for pension credit and the winter fuel payment but are not receiving them. I encourage anyone who is eligible, or knows someone who could be, to check and apply if they can.

Promoting Business and Growth

2. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help promote businesses in Northern Ireland. [900733]

11. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help grow the Northern Ireland economy. [900743]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): Northern Ireland is a great place to live, work and invest. That is something the Secretary of State and I have promoted in our over 120 visits and meetings. Growth is a key mission of this Government, which is why we are supporting UK businesses through securing further investment and through our industrial strategy. The Chancellor will set out the steps this Government are taking to support growth across the UK on 30 October.

Clive Jones: Businesses in Northern Ireland are struggling to operate in a constantly shifting regulatory environment that is deterring investment and decreasing business confidence. It is no wonder that a third of UK businesses want the Government to reduce Brexit-related barriers, such as customs procedures, according to a recent survey by Santander. A starting point would be agricultural trade. Will the Minister update the House on progress in negotiating a new veterinary and plant health agreement with the European Union?

Fleur Anderson: Many businesses have secured excellent deals in Northern Ireland, including EY, which is bringing over 1,000 jobs; Wrightbus, at its bus factory in Ballymena; and Hannon Pharma Link. We are working at pace on a veterinary agreement. We want to reduce checks and the need for checks, doing all that we can to protect the UK's internal market. This Government have brought in economic stability in place of the economic chaos we saw up until now, and Northern Ireland businesses will benefit from that.

Jerome Mayhew: It is all very well talking about an industrial strategy, but economists agree that increasing national insurance contributions for employers reduces profits, reduces pay and leads to fewer jobs. Does the Minister agree that if the Government decide to raise taxes, perhaps to fund union pay rises, then employer national insurance contributions would be the last tax to choose if they want to support Northern Ireland's economy?

Fleur Anderson: It is hard to take lectures from the Conservative party on investment and growth. We have had a change election. We will be investing in growth. The hon. Member has only a week to wait to listen to what will be happening in the Budget. In the meantime, we are going at pace. The international investment summit brought in considerable investment for companies based in Northern Ireland. We are moving on with our industrial strategy, Invest 2035. We are investing in skills and getting people into work, and transforming our health services. That is essential so that people will want to come to Northern Ireland because of good

health services, and so that they will be well enough to work. All of that is a package for investment in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): At last week's international investment summit, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor announced a total of £63 billion of private investment into the UK economy. What steps are the Secretary of State and the Minister taking to ensure Northern Ireland is at the forefront of this Government's effort to stimulate the investment that is needed?

Fleur Anderson: The Secretary of State went to the international summit with the First and Deputy First Ministers and they are all working together on this. The Ballymena bus manufacturer, Wrightbus, recently signed a deal worth £100 billion to supply more than 1,000 buses to Go-Ahead.¹ That shows real business confidence in Northern Ireland. We are also focusing on the skills gap. I have met wonderful skills providers across Northern Ireland to talk about how we can get people into well-paid jobs and to achieve faster growth.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): It is good to hear from the Minister about the work being done to close the skills gap. Can she provide further examples of that work and lay out her intentions for the future?

Fleur Anderson: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of the skills gap and economic inactivity in Northern Ireland. I have met wonderful skills providers across Northern Ireland, such as the Rural Women's Network, Bolster Community, the Superstars Club, Disability Action Northern Ireland, Ulster University and the King's Trust. A wealth of work is being done on good skills support, and we in the UK Government want to work with the Northern Ireland Executive to continue to provide support in that area. A reliable, bespoke skills offering is essential to futureproof Northern Ireland's key growth sectors.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): The Minister talks about growth, but the Mid South West region growth deal, which was paused by this Government, now lies inactive with no direction, and there are reports that much-needed private sector business involvement is now withdrawing. Will the Minister accept that this Government's handling and pausing of these growth deals was haphazard? Will she apologise to the people affected and enter urgent direct talks with businesses to get this deal back off the ground?

Fleur Anderson: The Secretary of State and I are in constant talks about such deals and with the deal providers. I know the value of these deals not just to the regions affected, but across Northern Ireland. However, the Government face a £22 billion black hole, and it is right that the Treasury considers all options on the table to address that. We will find out more in the Budget next week. The Mid South West and the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deals are being considered as part of

the spending review, and the Government will continue to work closely with the deals' partners and the Executive. The Secretary of State and I will continue to underline the importance of these deals to my ministerial colleagues in the Treasury.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Democratic Unionist party.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): We look forward to a positive conclusion to those discussions next week. As the Minister knows, both representatives from the Mid South West region growth deal and the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal are in Westminster today. Will the Minister acknowledge that, in working with businesses and in trying to encourage greater trade within our own country, the appointment of a chair of Intertrade UK was an important first step, but work needs to start, the terms of reference need to be set and businesses need to be able to engage with that body established to support trade within our country?

Fleur Anderson: I agree with the right hon. Member that Intertrade UK needs to get going with its work to encourage investment between all of the regions and nations of the UK. It is very important to set the terms of reference, and we are working with the organisation as fast as we can now that the chair is in their place.

Gavin Robinson: I thank the Minister for her reply. She will know from discussions with her Cabinet colleagues that decisions have been taken to delay the agreement on parcels, to delay the agreement on customs, and to avoid taking the decision on UK-wide labelling. Myriad other decisions were also made and supported by this House, including Labour Members, that are required to be implemented from the "Safeguarding the Union" document. She will know about the interface between trade and constitutional politics, so I urge her to engage with the Secretary of State, the Paymaster General and others within the Cabinet to get on and deliver what businesses and the people of Northern Ireland need?

Fleur Anderson: We are not the only Ministers who came into office three months ago to have faced all sorts of decisions that should have been taken by the previous Government. We have taken up those decisions on parcels and on every aspect that the right hon. Member mentions. He is right to raise them, because we do need to work on them to ensure that we protect the UK internal market and that we create the best possible regime for business.

Windsor Framework: Travel with Pets

3. **Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the Windsor Framework (Non-Commercial Movement of Pet Animals) Regulations 2024 on people travelling with pets from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. [900734]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The statutory instrument for the Northern Ireland pet travel scheme has now been laid. The scheme significantly reduces the requirements associated with

1. [Official Report, 24 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 6WC.] (Correction)

the original Northern Ireland protocol and provides a stable and long-term arrangement for those travelling with their pets within the UK.

Jim Allister: When the grip of EU law controls even the movement of our pets within the United Kingdom, is it not clear that we have gone far too far in regarding Northern Ireland as EU territory? For that is the reason for this absurd regulation, which, at the behest of the EU, imposes pet passports if a person wants to bring their pet from GB to Northern Ireland. There is no point the Secretary of State saying that it could have been worse; they should not exist at all. When will this Government get the EU off our backs and liberate the people of Northern Ireland and our pets from EU diktat?

Hilary Benn: As I hope the hon. Gentleman is aware, Northern Ireland pet owners will not face any checks and will not be required to hold a pet travel document. In discussing this matter, there is an obligation on him and all of us to ensure that we present the facts, so that people are not unnecessarily troubled.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The Executive's draft programme for government acknowledges that policing numbers in Northern Ireland are at an all-time low, a situation that Chief Constable Boutcher has described as dangerous. The draft programme commits to increasing numbers in line with New Decade, New Approach. Is the Secretary of State convinced that the budget sustainability plan is sufficient to achieve that aim?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure that fits with the question.

Alex Burghart: I was intending to ask a supplementary to Question 4.

Mr Speaker: Well, I think we will wait then. Let us move on. I call Dr Lauren Sullivan.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): Question 4, Mr Speaker. *[Laughter.]*

Budget Sustainability Plan

4. **Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive on the budget sustainability plan. [900735]

7. **Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive on the budget sustainability plan. [900738]

10. **David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive on the budget sustainability plan. [900741]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): Where were we, Mr Speaker?

I welcome the publication of the Northern Ireland Executive's budget sustainability plan—a positive and necessary step towards sustainable public finances—and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has agreed with the Northern Ireland Finance Minister that discussions over a long-term fiscal framework for Northern Ireland can now begin.

Dr Sullivan: Does the Secretary of State agree that to ensure sustainable finances the Northern Ireland Executive need to take steps to reform the NHS and public services?

Hilary Benn: I share my hon. Friend's view. As the House will be aware, people in Northern Ireland face the longest waiting lists in the whole United Kingdom, and all Governments, including the Northern Ireland Executive, have to balance the money coming in and the funds that they can raise, and take decisions about public service reform. I am very encouraged by the recent event organised by the Northern Ireland Health Minister, which Dr Bengoa, who produced a report on reform in Northern Ireland, returned to Northern Ireland to attend, because there is now a commitment to take forward that process.

Deirdre Costigan: What impact does the Secretary of State think that the UK leaving the European convention on human rights would have on the sustainability of Northern Ireland's finances and devolved government?

Hilary Benn: Given that the European convention on human rights is one of the foundations of the Good Friday agreement, I am frankly astonished that anyone who aspires to lead His Majesty's Opposition should suggest that our country should leave the ECHR. It would be utterly irresponsible.

David Smith: I commend all those who worked to re-establish devolved government earlier this year at Stormont. It is now vital that the Northern Ireland Executive ensure that they have sustainable finances. Does the Secretary of State agree that revenue raising by the Northern Ireland Executive has an important part to play in delivering financial sustainability and stability to Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: I do. Indeed, raising £113 million was part of the deal that the last Government put in place as part of the £3.3 billion package that led to the restoration—well, that followed the restoration of the Executive. That includes delivering a balanced budget in the current year, and I am very encouraged by the statements of the Northern Ireland Finance Minister in that regard.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The budget sustainability plan is commendable, but does the Secretary of State agree that our public services are in crisis? Our roads are crumbling, we have the longest health waiting lists in the whole of the UK, and our schools need investment. Northern Ireland needs to be in receipt of a fair long-term funding allocation, based on Treasury needs. Will he confirm to the House that he is making the case for that to the Treasury for the people of Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: Northern Ireland's greater spending needs are recognised. The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council was established to answer the question of what that additional funding should be, and it came to the conclusion that the figure should be 124%, which will be met this year in respect of the budget. The interim fiscal framework also said that if further credible sources come along suggesting that the figure should be different, the Government would undertake to look at that. But nothing takes away from the Executive's responsibility to manage the budget that they have, and to take decisions, including on reform.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Does the Secretary of State agree that the budget resources for the Northern Ireland Justice Minister are extremely short and that we are not able to recruit enough Police Service of Northern Ireland officers, and has he had any discussions with the Justice Minister about resolving that problem?

Hilary Benn: As the hon. Member will be aware, decisions about the allocation of the Northern Ireland budget rest with the Northern Ireland Executive. Funds go to the Justice Minister, who then decides principally how much to pass on to the policing board for policing costs and how much to deal with the justice system and the prisons, which are also under pressure. I recognise the pressure that PSNI officers face, not least because I met a number of those who were injured in the recent disorder.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is very generous of you to call me again, Mr Speaker. The Executive's draft programme for government acknowledges that policing numbers in Northern Ireland are at an all-time low, a situation that the chief constable has described as dangerous. The draft programme commits to increasing numbers in line with New Decade, New Approach. Is the Secretary of State convinced that the budget sustainability plan is sufficient to achieve that aim?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, as we discussed just a moment ago. I recognise the pressures on the PSNI, but it falls to the Executive to decide how much to allocate, from the funds available to them, to policing and other public services in Northern Ireland. If they wish to allocate more, they are in a position to do so, but it involves making a choice.

Alex Burghart: The Secretary of State is of course right that policing in Northern Ireland is a devolved matter, but national security is not. If we look at policing numbers right now, which are at an all-time low, we are reminded that his party's manifesto made explicit commitments to improving public services in Northern Ireland. Will the Government commit to ensuring that policing in Northern Ireland is sufficient to keep the people of Northern Ireland safe and maintain national security, and to protecting the additional security funding of £32 million a year that comes direct from His Majesty's Treasury?

Hilary Benn: On the latter point, the hon. Gentleman just has to wait a week to see what the Budget produces. I simply say to him that the PSNI, the security services

and others do an outstanding job in protecting the people of Northern Ireland from terrorist threats, and we should all support them in that endeavour.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): The budget sustainability plan highlights that Northern Ireland has been systemically underfunded, with the fiscal council estimating an annual shortfall of between £300 million and £400 million since 2022. Meanwhile, the Northern Ireland Executive reported a £559 million overspend between 2022 and 2024. What measures are the Government taking to address Northern Ireland's immediate budgetary pressures, ensure long-term financial stability and equitable funding, and, crucially, guarantee sustainable public services?

Hilary Benn: In addition to the £3.3 billion package that followed the restoration of the Executive, the Executive gained £185 million in July when the main estimates were published. In order to avoid having to repay the debt that the hon. Member refers to, they have to put their finances on a sustainable path, deliver a balanced budget, and raise the additional £130 million revenue to which they committed when the deal was done. The fiscal council's view is that 124% is the right funding.

Barriers to Trade

5. **Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab):** What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to remove barriers to trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.
[900736]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The Government are committed to implementing the Windsor framework in good faith, and to protecting Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market. We continue to take forward policies set out in "Safeguarding the Union", including most recently the establishment of the independent monitoring panel and the publication of guidance under section 46 of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): There is some concern regarding the supply of medicines to Northern Ireland. The British Generic Manufacturers Association says that there is an "absurd situation" in which there will be shortages due to the bureaucracy of the "UK only" labelling required for medicines going into Northern Ireland. The Government say that they are relaxed that the deadline will be met. Is the Secretary of State relaxed about the continued supply of medicines coming into Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: It is really important that the medicines that are required continue to be supplied. The industry has had quite a period in which to make arrangements to ensure that the labelling rules are met. I hope that, in the time available, those companies that have not done so will do so.

Windsor Framework: Labelling Requirements

6. **Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP):** What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on implementing the Windsor framework labelling

requirements set out in his Department's Command Paper entitled "Safeguarding the Union", published on 31 January 2024. [900737]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): Having carefully considered the results of the consultation with industry, the Government decided not to proceed with the introduction of mandatory "Not for EU" labelling in Great Britain from 1 October 2024. Instead, we will take the powers necessary to apply "Not for EU" labelling in the future, if that is required to secure supplies in Northern Ireland.

Sammy Wilson: The result of the Northern Ireland protocol, signed by the previous Government, has been to create an economic border between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and the imposition of EU law, which has created a problem for the supply of goods to Northern Ireland. When in opposition, Labour supported the idea of food labelling as a way of avoiding an interruption in the supply of food goods from GB to Northern Ireland, so why have the Government reneged on that promise, and what will be the trigger for its imposition if needed?

Hilary Benn: The consultation on UK-wide labelling led the industry to say that such labelling would impose huge costs on industry, and therefore on consumers, through raised goods prices. The aim is to ensure that goods are not delisted in Northern Ireland. That is why we are taking a power to ensure that if there is any evidence of that happening, the labelling requirements set out in "Safeguarding the Union" can be applied, including on individual products on a sectoral basis.

Mr Speaker: I did not come back to Josh Newbury after Question 5, so he will ask his supplementary question now.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Businesses in my constituency tell me that they face increased red tape and costs when importing from or exporting to Northern Ireland. Can the Secretary of State confirm that he is committed to unfettered access for goods moving from Northern Ireland to Great Britain?

Hilary Benn: I certainly can confirm that, and it is set out in the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020.

Violence Against Women and Girls

8. **Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP):** What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. [900739]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her new role as leader of the Social Democratic and Labour party, and I thank her for raising this important issue. Seven women and girls have been killed violently in Northern Ireland this year alone. That is devastating. I have discussed the importance of action on violence against women and girls with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and I welcome the Northern Ireland Executive making it a priority in their programme for Government, as well as the new strategic framework.

Claire Hanna: Mary Ward in my constituency became the fourth woman to be murdered in just six weeks in Northern Ireland. It remains one of the most dangerous places in Europe to be a woman, with a femicide rate twice that of Britain. We need to think deeply about the type of society that we have created, and that is manifesting in this way. The recent publication of the Northern Ireland strategy on violence against women was overdue and very welcome. Does the Minister agree that the funding and human resources attached to that strategy must be proportionate to the urgency and the deep roots of the issue? Will she support the Executive as they review the sentencing and judicial processes that are contributing to these very preventable deaths?

Fleur Anderson: My thoughts are with the family and friends, and all those affected by the murder of Mary Ward. Every woman deserves to feel safe. There is what has been called an epidemic of violence against women and girls in Northern Ireland. I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the new strategy. We need stronger action by the justice system and more support for frontline services in order to tackle harassment wherever it is—in homes, schools, workplaces, and on our streets. We need to challenge and change misogynistic attitudes and behaviours. That will need urgent action, and us working together, and this Government stand ready to do that.

PSNI: Surveillance Powers

9. **David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con):** Whether he has had discussions with the Police Service of Northern Ireland on its use of surveillance powers. [900740]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I meet regularly with the Chief Constable and his team to discuss a range of issues. While the Chief Constable has operational independence, the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office provides oversight of those powers to ensure that their use is necessary, proportionate and in accordance with the law.

David Davis: At a recent hearing of the Investigatory Powers Tribunal, it became apparent that the Northern Ireland police force had been caught surveilling journalists' telephones on the basis that they had received secret documents from whistleblowers. The reason for the secrecy of those documents was to cover up the embarrassment of the Royal Ulster Constabulary about its handling of the Loughinisland massacre. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the future use of surveillance powers by the Northern Ireland police?

Hilary Benn: I am indeed aware of the background to this case. The original search warrants were quashed and the police investigation was discontinued. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Investigatory Powers Tribunal is currently looking at this case, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment while that is ongoing. The Chief Constable has set up the McCullough review to look at the wider issue, and the right hon. Gentleman may well wish to make representations to that review.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900817] **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 23 October.

The Deputy Prime Minister (Angela Rayner): I have been asked to reply, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister is in Samoa to discuss shared opportunities in the Commonwealth, including how we work together to deliver economic growth. With increasing threats facing Britain, it is vital that we also strengthen defence, security and co-operation with our allies. That is why today, this Government signed a landmark defence agreement with Germany that will help keep us safe and create hundreds of jobs.

I know the whole House will join me in sending our best wishes to Sir Chris Hoy and his wife Sarra. He is a true sporting legend, and the courage and positivity they have shown will inspire many others. I also send our condolences to those affected by the train crash in Powys.

This morning, I have had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Adam Jogee: For 14 years, my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme had to suffer flatlining wages, in-work poverty, and a bust economy that served nobody. Can I urge the Deputy Prime Minister to use the Employment Rights Bill to turn the page on the last 14 years, give our businesses the support they need, and finally restore dignity, prosperity and opportunity to the good people of Newcastle-under-Lyme?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and welcome him to his place. When this Government took office, we promised the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation—a new deal for working people. We said that we would introduce a Bill within the first 100 days, and we have kept that promise. This is a Labour Government led by working people for working people.

Mr Speaker: I call the deputy Leader of the Opposition.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I join the Deputy Prime Minister in paying tribute to the bravery of Sir Chris Hoy—he truly is an inspiration to us all. I also echo her comments about the train crash in Powys.

What is the Deputy Prime Minister's definition of working people?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Let me start by welcoming the right hon. Gentleman to his new place. Today is our first exchange since he pushed for a July general election, and if his own side has not offered him a peerage, I certainly would have.

The definition of “working people” is the people who the Tory party have failed for the past 14 years.

Sir Oliver Dowden: The Deputy Prime Minister stood on a manifesto promising not to raise taxes on working people. It now appears that she cannot even define who working people are, so I will give her another go. There are 5 million small business owners in this country; are they working people?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I do not know how the shadow Deputy Prime Minister can stand there with a straight face when it was the small businesses—the working people of this country—that paid the price of the Conservatives crashing the economy, sending interest rates soaring. I think he needs to learn his own lessons in opposition.

Sir Oliver Dowden: I think the whole House will have heard the Deputy Prime Minister disregard 5 million hard-working small business owners. These are the publicans, the shopkeepers, the family running a local café. None of those count as working people to her.

Labour gave a clear commitment not to raise national insurance. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has given its view on this. It says that raising employer national insurance is

“a tax...on working people.”

Even the Chancellor said that raising employer national insurance was a “jobs tax” that will

“make each new recruit more expensive and increase the costs to business”.

So does the Deputy Prime Minister agree with the IFS and her own Chancellor?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I remember what the Conservatives said to business. What was it? “Eff business”, whereas this party held an international investment summit last week, which put about £63 billion into our economy. We are pro-business, pro-worker and getting on with fixing the mess that they left behind.

Sir Oliver Dowden: I think we can take it from that answer that the Deputy Prime Minister does not agree with the IFS, and I suppose it should not come as a surprise that she does not agree with her Chancellor, but does she agree with this:

“Working people will pay...when employers pass on the hike in national insurance”?

Those are her words, so does she at least agree with herself?

The Deputy Prime Minister: What I am incredibly proud of is that this week, this Government brought in a new employment Bill that will raise the living standards of 10 million workers. Would the shadow Deputy Prime Minister like to apologise for the hike in taxes—they are at a 70-year high—that he put on working people, the crashing of the economy and the disaster that he left behind?

Sir Oliver Dowden: The Deputy Prime Minister mentions her policy. Let us be clear: it is a £5 billion hit to the British economy, and that is her own assessment. Following these answers, there will be millions of working people even more worried about the tax rises coming their way in next week's Budget.

However, as this is our last exchange across the Dispatch Box, I would like to turn to somebody I hope we can all agree is a hard-working person—His Majesty the King. Will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in sending him best wishes ahead of the Commonwealth summit in Samoa? In particular, will she confirm that this Government recognise the unique role played by the Commonwealth, and will she commit to deepening that relationship, so that, under His Majesty's leadership, we build upon possibly the greatest legacy of the late Queen?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I will miss our exchanges—the battle of the gingers, the late nights voting—and in that spirit, I will agree with my right hon. Friend. The King does a tremendous job, and so did the late Queen. The Commonwealth is very important, and that is why the King and the Prime Minister are working together at the moment.

Sir Oliver Dowden: I thank the right hon. Lady for that answer. Our Commonwealth family is brought together by historical and cultural ties—indeed, much like the pair of us. *[Interruption.]* I will resist the temptation to replicate that. As we look to the Commonwealth's future, we have the opportunity to deepen our economic relationship. Will she assure the House that the Prime Minister will use the summit to continue the work, begun by the last Government, of building deeper economic ties with our Commonwealth friends and allies?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We talk about economics; the architect of the 2024 Tory general election campaign is doing his victory lap before retiring with the hereditary peers that he fought so hard to protect. He leaves behind a Tory party in utter denial—heads in the sand, refusing to accept their rejection by the British public. Their plan for Britain includes scrapping the minimum wage, cutting maternity pay and tax breaks for the big oil companies. This Labour Government were elected—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Dr Evans, you have got a sore neck; I wish a little that it was your throat.

The Deputy Prime Minister: Tory Members do not like to hear it, but this Labour Government were elected to end the Tory chaos, and that is exactly what we are doing, with £600 more in the pockets of insecure workers, 30,000 new dads given paternity leave and 10 million working people better off. While their so-called leadership candidates argue about what went wrong, this Labour Government are getting on with rebuilding Britain.

Q2. [900818] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I, like many MPs, have heard many heart-rending stories of constituents who have had poor end-of-life support. Had palliative care been available alongside an end-of-life plan, their experiences could have been so different. Will the Deputy Prime Minister agree to set up a commission for palliative and end-of-life care, so that everyone can access the very best support when terminally ill and have a peaceful and dignified death, and will she meet to discuss that?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising what is an emotive subject for Members on both sides of the House. From my work in this area

before I was in this place, I know what incredible work this is, and what an honour it is to be there for somebody at the end of their life. Discussions have begun on how to improve access to palliative and end-of-life care, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss this issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): May I associate myself and the Liberal Democrats with the Deputy Prime Minister's remarks about Chris Hoy, and about all those involved in the train crash?

Our NHS is bracing itself for a winter crisis. One of the causes of the winter crisis every year is that there are thousands of people in hospitals who are fit to go home, but who cannot be discharged because there are not the care workers in place to enable people to recover at home or in a care home. Will the Deputy Prime Minister consider the Liberal Democrats' idea of an NHS winter taskforce to winter-proof our NHS, end the cycle of the winter crisis, and put to an end the scandal of hospital patients paying the price of the social care crisis left by the Conservatives?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, and I share her desire to ensure that care workers are given the respect and importance that they deserve. They are critical to solving the problems in our national health service. The Labour party will create a national care service, and we are launching our first ever fair pay agreement for care professionals to boost recruitment and retention. We must get the NHS back on its feet after the disaster of the Conservatives, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will have more to say on that in the Budget.

Daisy Cooper: I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for her answer. We stand ready, as a party of constructive opposition, to work with the Government to fix our social care system. However, a measure that could make it harder for us to keep the carers that we so desperately need would be an increase in employers' national insurance contributions. Were that measure to go ahead, it would affect millions of small businesses, including 18,000 small care providers. Will the Deputy Prime Minister assure the House that nothing in the Budget will make it harder for vulnerable people to access the care workers and the care that they desperately need?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Again, I will not speculate on the Budget, not least with the Chancellor sat beside me. To reiterate what the Chancellor and the Prime Minister have said, this Budget will recognise that working people of this country and enterprise in this country have been hard-hit by 14 years of the Conservatives. We will rebuild Britain, and we will grow our economy to pay for our public services.

Q4. [900820] Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): Next year marks the 200th anniversary of the Stockton to Darlington railway, but the rail industry in my area is in peril. Hundreds of jobs are at risk at Hitachi Rail as a consequence of a lack of action from the previous Government. Will the Deputy Prime Minister join me and our hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe

and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland), along with workers, management and trade unions, in ensuring that no stone is left unturned as we fight for the future of the Hitachi rail factory?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend to his place. He has been a champion for workers at Newton Aycliffe from day one. I know he has met the Transport Secretary, and I can assure him that we are in close contact with Hitachi on operations to secure a sustainable future for Newton Aycliffe. We are committed to a long-term industrial strategy for rolling stock, seeking to support British manufacturing and end the volatility of recent years.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): In the spirit of today's cross-party working, will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in applauding the brave Labour staff members who travelled across the Atlantic to campaign against Donald Trump?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am loving this love-in; I do not often get it. What I will say to the right hon. Gentleman is that people in their own time often go and campaign, and that is what we have seen. It happens in all political parties—people go and campaign, and they do what they want to do in their own time with their own money.

Q7. [900823] **Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Like many in my constituency of Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy, my family knows what it means to raise and support a disabled child. Charities such as The Yard in Kirkcaldy do an amazing job providing vital additional help for disabled children and their families. Last month, a survey found that our country is so broken that three quarters of parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities have been forced to give up work or cut their hours. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that our Labour Government must tackle this intolerable reality?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to those who work with children with special educational needs and disabilities. I myself have my amazing son, who does tremendously well given the challenges he has faced in life. I know from personal experience that the system is just not working for children and families. Future funding decisions will need to be taken as part of the upcoming spending review, but we will work with the sector to deliver our shared mission and restore parents' trust.

Q3. [900819] **Mr Peter Bedford** (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Just three months into this Labour Government, we have seen brutal cuts to support for pensioners and the taxing of education, and just this week we have seen £5 billion of additional pressure put on British businesses. Why do this Government have such a problem with aspiration?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Member might not have been in this place—I welcome him to his place now—in the last Parliament, but it was his Government who left the £22 billion black hole, his Government who left us with the biggest housing crisis, his Government

who crashed the economy and his Government who saw inflation go to 11%, where pensioners were worse off than they are now.

Q9. [900825] **Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): I watched in horror and condemned the act of 7 October by the terrorist group Hamas. A year later, I watch in horror as 42,000 people are killed in Gaza, 11,000 of them children. People have been burned alive attached to drips, aid workers have been killed and now families are starving. Our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said that the world will not stand by and see the lack of humanitarian assistance. If the Israeli Government will not listen to our Prime Minister's words, what tangible, measurable actions will we take as the UK Government?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this serious and important issue. The humanitarian situation in northern Gaza is dire. We need an immediate ceasefire, much more aid allowed to flow in and an immediate release of all the hostages. We have suspended UK export licences to Israel for items that might be used in the current conflict. The Government have concluded that there is a clear risk that items exported to Israel might be used in serious violations of international humanitarian law in Gaza. That does not change our position of steadfast support for Israel's security, but we will always do so in a manner consistent with our obligations under domestic and international law.

Q5. [900821] **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Our child protection services have had to deal with a number of cases where parents and carers have argued that their fatal actions were lawful punishment. Will the Deputy Prime Minister bring forward legislation bringing the rest of our country into line with Scotland and Wales, so that all children enjoy unambiguous protection in law against violence?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. I will ensure that the Minister has a meeting with him. The first job of any Government is to protect their citizens and that includes our children. We will make sure we work across the House to deliver that.

Q10. [900826] **Carolyn Harris** (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): Last Friday was International Menopause Day and the Government announced Mariella Frostrup as the new menopause employment ambassador. Mariella will be working across Whitehall to ensure every Department recognises the need to support women through their menopausal years. Hopefully, the Deputy Prime Minister will join me in celebrating that appointment, and confirm that this Government will do all they can to keep menopausal women happy, healthy and wonderful.

The Deputy Prime Minister: Absolutely, and I thank my hon. Friend for all her work in this area. This Government will boost protections for women experiencing menopause symptoms at work and I am proud that we have appointed Mariella Frostrup as the new menopause employment ambassador. She is a powerful champion who will work with employers across the country to

raise awareness and improve workplace support for women, and help them to stay in work and progress in their careers.

Q6. [900822] Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Charlie from my constituency is an eight-year-old boy with an autism diagnosis who has been out of school for almost a year. He is one of 1,800 children in Surrey missing school because of a lack of appropriate special educational needs provision. Will the Government commit to ending this scandal by properly funding special educational needs provision in next week's Budget, so that children like Charlie, in my constituency of Esher and Walton and beyond, are no longer let down?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for her very important question. I am sorry to hear about what Charlie and many other children with special educational needs have gone through. We inherited a really dire situation and many Members across the House have raised this issue. I am sure the Chancellor has heard what she has said about the upcoming Budget.

Q12. [900828] Mike Tapp (Dover and Deal) (Lab): This morning we woke to more tragic news of deaths in the channel, something we are hearing far too often. Just last month, we saw the death of a pregnant woman and children—children, Mr Speaker. What are the Government doing to take on the evil smuggling gangs who are trading in human misery?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and welcome him, and his expertise in the National Crime Agency, to this place. He knows that we inherited an asylum system in chaos. As he rightly says, these are people—women and children. We are putting in place a credible plan to protect our borders and remove those with no right to be here by setting up our border security command, backed by £75 million of investment. We are working with our international partners to target and disrupt the criminal smuggling gangs.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Q8. [900824] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the Government please continue to work closely with me and West Lindsey district council to ensure that RAF Scampton is sold off in a timely fashion at a fair price, so that we secure the future of the runway, the spaceport and the heritage centre, rather than maximise value and cover it with housing?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, the Father of the House, for his question. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is taking urgent action to clear the backlog of cases and reduce the use of asylum accommodation, saving millions for taxpayers. I will ensure that he is kept fully updated as the Scampton decommissioning and disposal process is followed.

Q15. [900831] Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, hundreds of leaseholders, tenants and shared owners are living in

properties with cladding and other defects. Around the country, there are thousands. Their lives are on hold. Many are facing bankruptcy and delaying having children, unable to move. We have had another change in ministerial responsibility. Will the Deputy Prime Minister take a personal lead on keeping on top of this issue, as years since Grenfell people are still living in limbo and need some hope of change?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. Let me say from the outset that the pace of remediation has been too slow. I do take a personal lead: seven years on from the Grenfell Tower tragedy, it is unacceptable that so many buildings still have unsafe cladding. I am meeting developers, mayors, regulators and national building safety bodies to press the urgency of this work, and I will ensure that action is being taken to make homes safe.

Q11. [900827] Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Shropshire's farmers have been suffering from flooding following 18 months of incredibly wet weather, topped off last Wednesday by a month's worth of rain in 24 hours. They were not eligible for the farming recovery fund, and a freedom of information request by *Farmers Weekly* found that only £2.1 million of that £50 million has been handed out to farmers. Will the Government consider extending the eligibility of that scheme so that we can keep farmers going when they are deluged by floodwater?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am really sorry to hear the plight of Shropshire farmers. We inherited the flood defence programme in disrepair, and thanks to 14 years of mismanagement and failure, communities are unprotected and families and businesses are forced to pay the price. We launched a flood defence taskforce to turbocharge the delivery and co-ordination of flood defences, and we are investing £1.5 billion this year to scale up flooding national resilience. I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets a meeting with the Minister.¹

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): The Government have delivered on their manifesto commitment to introduce the Employment Rights Bill. It includes a historic fair pay agreement for care workers, which will benefit all those who care for older and disabled adults such as those in my constituency. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that care workers deserve pay and conditions that match the amazing work they do to support our loved ones to have a fulfilling life?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend to her place. As a biased former care worker, I will always champion carers and the complex quality and professional work that they do. I absolutely agree that care workers deserve the pay and conditions to match their enormous contribution to our community. I am proud to say that we are delivering that fair pay agreement that will give carers the recognition that they deserve, and I will ensure that those carers are able to deliver the best possible care to our loved ones.

1. [Official Report, 21 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 4WC.] (Correction)

Q13. [900829] James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): Last month, a widely reported study from Aston Business School showed that UK goods exports to the EU are 27% down, and imports are 32% lower than they would otherwise have been, thanks to the Conservatives' failed Brexit deal. Will the Deputy Prime Minister tell me what steps the Government are taking as part of their reset with the EU to cut Brexit red tape for small businesses, to help our economy get growing again?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Member to his place. He is right to advocate for small businesses, which are the backbone of our economy. This Government are turning the page on the relationship with Europe, reinvigorating alliances and forging new partnerships rather than reopening the divisions of the past. We will improve the UK's trade and investment relationship with the EU, tearing down unnecessary barriers to trade. That will not involve rejoining the single market and customs union or introducing freedom of movement, but we will make that relationship better.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): Some 27,000 people in the Cities of London and Westminster live in the private rented sector. After 14 years of neglect and delay, they face damp and mould in their homes, and risk no-fault evictions and out-of-the-blue rent hikes. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that the Renters' Rights Bill currently in Committee will transform the lives of private renters and finally rebalance power between tenants and landlords?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I welcome my hon. Friend to her place. I am incredibly proud of the Renters' Rights Bill that we are pushing through Parliament, because too many renters are being exploited by a minority of unscrupulous landlords, unable to challenge bad practices because they could be evicted at any moment. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members chunter, but they promised the electorate that and failed to deliver. We will deliver.

Q14. [900830] Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Communities across the country, including in Bedfordshire, recently experienced widespread flooding. The village of Maulden in my constituency has experienced an increase in flooding following cumulative housing development. As the Deputy Prime Minister requires communities across the country to build more homes, will she also ensure that those new developments do not increase the flooding risk?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I welcome the hon. Member to his place. We recognise the devastating impact that flooding can have. I know that the flooding Minister visited Bedfordshire in September to meet volunteers and residents. We inherited flood defences in disrepair and behind schedule. We have launched the floods resilience taskforce, and when it comes to the planning reforms needed to deliver the 1.5 million homes this country needs, we will ensure that the right infrastructure is in place and that communities are resilient.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Zoe's Place, in the West Derby area of Liverpool, is a hospice that provides support to sick children and their families. It has been threatened with closure and has to find £5 million by the end of the year. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that such hospices need to be on a statutory footing and not reliant on charitable funding?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hospice situation in this country has faced significant challenges because of the 14 years of devastation under the Conservatives. The Health Secretary has already raised these issues and knows that this is of importance; I will make sure that my hon. Friend gets to meet him.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister will know that my constituency, and Lincolnshire as a whole, is the breadbasket of Britain, producing 12% of the food consumed across the entire nation, including 30% of the vegetables and 20% of the sugar beet. That is because of the grade 1 and 2 land in Lincolnshire, yet Lincolnshire faces an invasion of giant pylons down the east coast and huge solar developments. Will she meet a delegation of colleagues from Lincolnshire and nearby, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), so that we can establish that energy security must never be a competitor with food security?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Member for his question. He knows that we launched a consultation on the national planning policy framework. We will protect agricultural land, we will ensure that we have renewable energy so we have energy security in this country, and we will get Britain building again.

Independent Water Commission

12.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House on the action that this Government are taking to fundamentally transform our water industry and clean up our waterways for good.

Fourteen years of Conservative failure have left our water sector in disrepair. The rivers, lakes and seas that we all love have record levels of pollution. Severe droughts are set to leave parts of the country facing significant water shortages by 2050, particularly in the south-east, and water companies forecast that England will need to find an extra 5 billion litres of water a day to fill the gap between supply and demand by that same year. A rising population and the increasing impacts of climate change are putting strain on the water system. Firmer action should have been taken by the previous Government to ensure that money was invested to fix the water and sewerage system. Instead, they allowed that money to be siphoned off for bonuses while our water infrastructure crumbled.

A secure water supply is essential for every home and business throughout the country. It is the foundation of our economy, our communities and our global security. It is essential to life itself. We use water to cool power stations, and it is vital to our electricity supply. We use water to grow the crops that provide the food on our plate, and we use it to supply our leisure industries. Without a resilient water supply, we cannot build the new homes and critical infrastructure that we need to grow the economy.

Concerns about pollution, water shortages, bill increases and the sector's financial resilience all point to the need for profound change. The water sector needs a complete reset, with a reformed water sector working in partnership with Government to bring in the investment we need. We need a clear long-term plan to ensure that the sector puts customers and the environment first and can attract investment to upgrade our infrastructure. We need a water system fit for the future. We cannot clean up our rivers, lakes and seas overnight, but we have a plan, and the work of change has started.

On 11 July, I made a statement to the House on the agreement that I reached with water companies and Ofwat to ringfence money earmarked for investment in water infrastructure so that it can no longer be diverted for shareholder payouts and undeserved bonus payments. On 9 September, we introduced the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which sets out new measures, including measures strengthening regulation to ensure that water bosses face personal criminal liability for serious and repeated lawbreaking; giving the water regulator new powers to ban the payment of bonuses if environmental standards are not met; and boosting accountability for water executives through a new code of conduct. Today, I am pleased to announce the third stage of our plan.

Together with the Welsh Government, we are launching an independent commission that will lead the biggest review of the water industry since privatisation 35 years ago. The commission will ensure that we have the robust regulatory framework that we need to attract the significant investment that is required to clean up our waterways,

build new infrastructure to address water scarcity, and restore public confidence in the sector. I am delighted that it will be led by the former deputy governor of the Bank of England, Sir Jon Cunliffe, who has decades of economic and regulatory experience. Sir Jon will be supported by an advisory group of experts covering areas such as the environment, public health, engineering, customers, investors and economics. He will seek advice from wider groups of stakeholders including environmental campaigners, consumer champions, water companies, regulators and the public at large.

The commission will conduct a root-and-branch review of the water sector's regulatory system. It will cover the water industry in England and Wales and the strategic planning framework under the water framework directive and river basin management plans to ensure that strategic water planning across sectors is effective at catchment, regional and national scales. Where housing, planning, agriculture and drainage interlink with strategic planning across the water system, they are also in scope.

The commission will set a new framework for the future. It will not make recommendations that affect the current price review '24 process, in order to ensure that there is a stable climate for investment as that process concludes. It will be pragmatic and will focus on reforms that improve the privatised regulatory model. Nationalisation of the water sector will not be in scope, because of the high costs of buying out the current owners, lack of evidence that it would lead to improvements, and the long delays that it would cause in the process of cleaning up polluted water and serving customers better.

The commission will make recommendations in the first half of 2025, reporting to me as Environment Secretary and to the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs in Wales. Once it has made its recommendations, the UK and Welsh Governments will respond and consult on proposals, including subsequent legislation. Further details of the commission's scope, delivery, approach and timelines are set out in its terms of reference, which will be available on gov.uk today.

This Government will deliver an ambitious, long-term and collaborative approach to reforming the water sector, creating a strong new partnership between Government, water companies, customers, investors and all those who work to protect our precious environment. The commission will set the groundwork for the reformed water sector that we want to see. I thank Sir Jon for leading this important work.

This is our opportunity to ensure that our children, and their children, have the chance to create memories that will last a lifetime—to splash about at the seaside, row on our rivers or enjoy a picnic on the lake shore. This is our opportunity to inject billions of pounds into the economy and to power UK growth by attracting global investment into a transformed water sector. This is our opportunity to clean up our water once and for all.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

12.39 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for prior sight of his statement.

[Robbie Moore]

Fourteen years in opposition—and this is what the Labour party has to offer. Labour Members have had more than a decade to craft a clear package of policies, listen to campaigners and prepare to govern, yet what they have brought to the House today illustrates no sign of any ambition. This is a sign of hesitation. It is a way to delay the difficult decisions and buy themselves more time. It is part of a growing trend that unfortunately we are seeing consistently from this new Labour Government, across all Departments: announce a review, a taskforce and yet another commission, and hope the public do not notice that really they never had much of a plan at all.

That approach is simply not going to wash with the bill payers. Before the election, the Secretary of State toured the country with campaigners like Feargal Sharkey, promising radical change to the sector. He is now in power, and what has he actually achieved so far? He spent the entire election campaign telling voters that he wanted to put water company bosses in the dock, but we can see from the Government's announcements on the Water (Special Measures) Bill that it will achieve no such thing, as campaigners and industry experts have already pointed out. Nor will the Bill provide any reassurance whatever for investors. Rather marvellously, the Secretary of State has managed not only to frustrate campaigners, but to disenfranchise investors from any long-term aspirations to invest in the sector.

The Secretary of State says that he has announced a ban on water company bonuses. Hang on: that was a policy that we brought forward in our time in government and that the Secretary of State is now attempting to reannounce and pass off as his own. It was the Conservatives who announced a ban on water company bosses' bonuses, linked shareholder dividends to environmental performance, quadrupled water company inspections, fast-tracked investments to cut spills and launched a whistleblowing portal for water company workers to report breaches.

It is surprising to hear the Secretary of State claim that his Government are truly serious about this issue, when their proposals are less firm than the measures delivered by the previous Government. He could take real action right now by progressing the last Conservative Administration's plans for an automatic ban on water company bosses' bonuses when offences take place. Rehashing announcements already set in motion by the Conservative Government, putting forward policies that will not actually put more pressure on water company bosses and then simply pressing pause on a year-long review will not result in the widespread change that Labour promised its voters.

The Secretary of State acknowledges that the announced review will make no recommendations that affect the current price review '24 process, meaning that there will be no chance of the Government considering making any significant change until 2029 at the earliest. Will he provide an outline of the timeframe associated with actual recommendations from the review being implemented and put in place? When is any real benefit from this further review, taskforce or commission likely to be experienced, not only for the water industry, in terms of infrastructure improvements, but for the bill payer and the environment? It seems to me that the Secretary of

State is just kicking the can down the road with another review, another taskforce and another commission, and removing himself from any of the tough decisions.

The Secretary of State said that the review would have no impact on the price review '24 process. Will he outline exactly when the positive impacts will come? By my calculations, it will not be until 2029 at the earliest. Will he also outline the impact of the review on the measures proposed in the Water (Special Measures) Bill? What will be done if the recommendations do not sit comfortably with the current proposals?

One cannot help concluding that the Secretary of State is out of depth on this issue, cannot deliver on the tough language that he promised in the run-up to the general election and is now doing nothing more than attempting to kick the tough decisions down the road and into the long grass. This Secretary of State seems to be all bark and no bite.

Steve Reed: Well, that was all a little bit embarrassing, wasn't it? The previous Government had 14 years in power, our rivers, lakes and seas are awash with record levels of pollution, and that is all the Conservatives have to say. I took action seven days after the general election: I brought the water chief execs into my office, and we agreed that money earmarked for investment will be ringfenced so that it cannot be diverted to pay multimillion-pound bonuses to water chief execs who oversee failure in the water sector, as happened on the shadow Minister's watch. The commission will reset the sector that the Conservatives broke, and clean up the water that they polluted. It will report to the Government in June and inform subsequent legislation.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): At the weekend, I went swimming in the North sea—probably for the last time this year—having first checked on the Surfers Against Sewage website that there had not been any legal or illegal spills. It is disgraceful that the last Conservative Government left our seas and waterways in such a state, and it is notable that Water UK continuously blames the regulator for not allowing it to raise prices in order to invest further in our system. Will the Secretary of State make sure that we assess the value extracted by the water companies? They have taken billions of pounds in profits and hundreds of millions in bonuses. We need to make sure that future investment adds value and does not take it away.

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. Unfortunately, customers have been left to pay the price of 14 years of Conservative failure to secure investment in our water infrastructure, so it has collapsed to such an extent that Ofwat now recommends eye-watering bill increases. Every penny of that is down to the failure of the Conservative party. Our reset will ensure that that kind of catastrophic failure can never happen again.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. To a large degree, I welcome it—or at least the intention behind it—but water companies dumped 54% more sewage into our lakes, rivers and coastal areas in 2023 than in the previous year. That amounts to 464,000 spills, including many in the lakes and rivers

of Westmorland. My constituency is the most beautiful part of England and also the wettest, so water is deeply personal to us.

Does the Secretary of State understand my worry that we might have gone from having a Conservative Government who would not face up to this outrage or tackle it, to having a new Labour Administration who have acknowledged this outrage and decisively resolved to have a jolly good think about it? While Thames Water crumbles as we speak and water companies seek bill increases of 40%, despite such poor performance across the country, does he really think that having a commission is necessary, given the urgent need for action? We have a fragmented, under-resourced and under-powered regulatory system, which allows powerful water companies to play regulators off against each other while our constituents pay the price. Is the solution not obvious? As the Liberal Democrats propose, we should create a new, unified and far more powerful clean water authority.

Does the Secretary of State share my deep concern that the current regulator has to give 25 years' notice in order to strip a water company of its licence for environmental failure? Will he ensure that this ludicrous protection for failing companies should be replaced by a six-month period of notice instead? We are already more than 5% of the way through this Parliament, and this issue is one of our constituents' most pressing concerns. Do we have to drag our heels like this?

Steve Reed: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is absolutely right to point out that last year we saw the highest levels of sewage ever recorded in our rivers, lakes and seas. No wonder the public are so angry, including in his constituency. Tragically, Lake Windermere, an iconic and beautiful site, has been polluted with sewage and agricultural run-off because of the failures of the previous Government.

I have taken action already. We had a reset moment just seven days after the general election, when we carried out within a week things that the Conservatives failed to do in 14 years in power. The Water (Special Measures) Bill is going through the Houses of Parliament right now to ban the payment of unfair bonuses to water bosses. The commission, led by Sir Jon Cunliffe, will look at the entire sector—root and branch—including governance and regulation, which the hon. Gentleman points to. It will look specifically at the point that he has raised, so that we end up with a system of regulation that is fit to clean up our waterways and then to protect them for the decades to come.

Torsten Bell (Swansea West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and his announcement of this important review. To have Sir Jon Cunliffe, a long-term public servant, running it is very welcome indeed. Will my right hon. Friend say a bit more about how the close working between the Welsh Government and the UK Government will work, because that will be important in determining how this announcement affects my constituents?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend alludes to an important point. Rivers and water catchments are no respecters of boundaries, and it is important that we have a model that works within catchments, including where they cross boundaries, as they do in some cases between

England and Wales. The review has been jointly commissioned by the UK and Welsh Governments, and it will jointly report to both Governments. It will seek a better model for structuring and supporting our water sector, so that we can ensure that we clean up all our rivers, all our lakes and all our seas; so that the public can get back to enjoying them; and so that we can bring in the investment to support the infrastructure, which will be delivered at pace, to drive economic growth in every single part of the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Chair of the Select Committee.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Secretary of State is quite right to point to the role of the payment of bonuses and dividends in bringing us to this point, but he must surely acknowledge that that is far from being the whole story. There are a number of business and accounting practices in companies such as Thames Water that have brought us to the stage we are at today. If he is serious about having a water system that is fit for the future, he has to understand properly what has gone on before. Will he therefore confirm that the commission will be properly resourced with the necessary forensic accounting resource, so that those who have been responsible for the most egregious practices in the past and who now seem to be appearing in other water companies around the country will not be allowed to do the same thing there?

Steve Reed: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for the points that he makes. Of course, he is right. The Water (Special Measures) Bill, with its ban on bonuses, will not be sufficient to reset the sector, although it is an ask that the public are rightly making because of the unfairness of people who are overseeing failure being richly rewarded for that failure. That should not have been allowed to go on under the previous Government, and it will not go on under this new Government.

The reason we have set up the commission is to address the very points the right hon. Gentleman makes about financial and environmental sustainability and viability. I look forward to working with him and his Committee as the commission carries out its work, as we review its findings in the summer of next year, and as we then shape what will be significant new legislation to reset the sector—a reformed sector—in a new partnership with Government to bring in the investment that will finally clean up our waterways.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I declare an interest as a customer of Southern Water who lost my water supply for five days earlier this year, as did 30,000 of my constituents. As the Secretary of State knows well from his visits to Hastings and to Rye, we have major issues from flooding to sewage to water outages. I welcome the water commission. How can my constituents, particularly volunteer groups such as the Clean Water Action group, have their voices heard, particularly their concerns about ensuring that the regulators have the power and resources to clean up our sea?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is a powerful campaigner for cleaner water. In fact, it is hard to think of anybody who has campaigned harder on the issue. The commission will seek to engage the public at large, as well as a wider

[*Steve Reed*]

group of stakeholders who will be represented on an advisory group, which will include a customer voice. Once the commission has reported, the Government will consult on those findings and that will inform the subsequent legislation that will reset this sector once and for all.

Mr Speaker: Order. I say gently to the Secretary of State that I am here and he should be speaking through the Chair, not to the Member, as he has done for the last two questions. We can work together to get everybody looking the right way. I call Sir Gavin Williamson to set a good example.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): In my constituency we have beautiful rivers, including the great and mighty River Trent and the River Penk. Over the last few years, as more transparent data has become available, we have been able to see the number of sewage discharges going into those rivers. Will the Secretary of State promise the House that looking at how we can reduce sewage discharges into the Trent and the Penk will be at the heart of what the commission does?

Steve Reed: It is always a pleasure, of course, to gaze at you, Mr Speaker, rather than elsewhere in the Chamber.

The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The point of the commission is to identify ways in which we can strengthen regulation and operations so that we can bring in the investment, clean up our water sector once and for all, and reduce and remove the pollution that is destroying so many beautiful rivers, including those in his constituency.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the commission that has been set up today—it is absolutely fantastic. Gower was the first area of outstanding natural beauty in the whole of the United Kingdom, and the bathing waters there are second to none, but some of them are less so. I would like to highlight a campaign I have set up to test the bathing water in the winter season, with my constituents, local business and the Gower Society, because data is key—it is what will drive the improvement of our bathing water. Will he congratulate Surfers Against Sewage, which has been really supportive, and everybody in my constituency who is taking part and taking control?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend represents an incredibly beautiful part of the country in the Gower, and her constituents and the many people who visit those beauty spots will want to know that their children can enjoy the water without risk of contamination from polluted water. Of course I congratulate Surfers Against Sewage and the many campaigners who have pushed for reform. They will be invited to participate in the work of the commission—they have huge expertise. I hope that, before long, her constituents who are testing the quality of the water will start to see improvements until it is pure and crystal clear, as it should always have been.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): The Secretary of State highlights the scandal of sewage in our seas and rivers. Indeed, raw sewage was dumped into our

rivers and seas for 3.6 million hours last year. Since privatisation, £72 billion has been paid to shareholders in dividends, while his Department highlights that it would cost £56 billion to carry out the necessary investment, so privatisation has failed as a model for getting the investments in place. Will he therefore confirm that the commission will look at what ownership model for water will be effective in addressing this scandal, including the option of bringing water back into public hands?

Steve Reed: The reason I have ruled out nationalisation is that it would not resolve the problems we face. We saw in the Olympics in France that the River Seine was not able to be used for swimming because of pollution. That is a state-owned water system. We see the problems in Scotland. That is a state-owned water system as well. The problems are those of governance and regulation. Nationalisation would cost towards £100 billion of public money—money that does not exist—and the time it would take to unpick the current models of ownership, during which time investment would be choked off, would see our rivers, lakes and seas filled with even more sewage and pollution, rather than less. I am more interested in the purity of our water than the purity of our ideology. I will do what works best as quickly as possible. The commission will give us guidance on how we should change the system to make sure it works for everybody.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): For the last few weeks, I have been conducting independent tests, with colleagues from Bournemouth University, for nitrates and bacteria in the lovely Poole harbour and the surrounding waters. I have noticed, from talking to colleagues, that the frequency of official testing and the number of sites at which those tests are carried out have been reduced significantly by the Environment Agency over the years. Will the commission look at those issues? Will testing and the frequency of testing be included in its work?

Steve Reed: I recognise what my hon. Friend says about Poole harbour. It is, indeed, an incredibly beautiful part of the country. I have visited it several times and, sadly, I have also seen the extent and impact of the pollution. We are making sure that all sewage outlets are monitored through compulsory means, which is not the case currently. The commission will look at how we can improve the testing and monitoring of water quality as part of the strengthening of regulation, which will form a key part of its work.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned the importance of drainage in reducing incidents of pollution caused by flooding. Will he therefore commit today, while we await the outcome of the commission, to distributing the £75 million allocated by the previous Government to internal drainage boards, so that farmers in my constituency and others in the River Hull catchment do not have to spend another winter under water?

Steve Reed: Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman is referring to commitments to spend money that did not exist. We are waiting for the Chancellor to announce her Budget from this Dispatch Box in almost exactly one week's time, and we will find out much more then.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Last year, sewage was dumped 57 times along the precious coastline of my constituency—the equivalent of 594 hours of sewage spillages. Our constituents are rightly disgusted by this state of affairs. The Conservatives covered up this scandal for 14 years. Will my right hon. Friend tell me what this new Labour Government will do to hold companies to account?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I had the pleasure of visiting Bournemouth West with her, and I saw for myself the impact on businesses and tourism in that part of the world. Parents are frightened to let their kids go in the sea at certain times of day, when the water contamination has reached unacceptable levels. The commission will look at how we can strengthen regulation and governance to ensure that the practices that water companies have got away with over recent years can no longer happen. It will also look at how we can bring in the investment needed to repair our broken water infrastructure, so that we can drive economic growth in every part of the country, including, of course, in Bournemouth West.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): The use of storm overflows in places such as Skegby in Ashfield is absolutely disgusting and it pollutes my rivers, so will the Secretary of State commit to giving the water companies a deadline for ending their use?

Steve Reed: It will be for the commission to look at what we need to do to improve infrastructure and fix the broken system that we have at the moment. We are making sure that every overflow has monitoring on it, so that we know exactly what is coming out of it. We can therefore take action against the water companies that might be responsible.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency this week, as well as having sewage in our bathing waters, we have had sewage on the streets in Penryn. The Conservative party cut funding to the regulator in 2015. Will the Secretary of State please confirm that the review will completely reset the role of the regulator?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I had the pleasure of visiting Truro and Falmouth during the election, and I saw for myself the problems there. It is disgusting to see sewage bubbling up into the streets and even into some people's back gardens because the sewage infrastructure is so broken after the previous Government failed for 14 years to bring in the investment necessary to upgrade it. The commission will look at how we secure funding and get that infrastructure rebuilt at pace, so that we can improve the situation we are hearing about. It will also look at regulation and the role of the regulator and make proposals as to how we can improve those, so that we have regulation that is fit for purpose.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): In Kingsbridge, in my constituency, the residents are literally wading through sewage, which seeps out of the drains in heavy rain due to a mixture of increased sewage from new houses and ancient culverts that cannot cope. I do not think that those residents will be encouraged by a review and a commission, which will not solve the problems they will face this winter. Will the Minister

therefore meet me to discuss the particularly difficult and chronic problem in Kingsbridge? We need to find a solution, because we have not had one for a long time and we desperately need to sort this out.

Steve Reed: I have, of course, already taken action myself. I had the water chief executives into my office just seven days after the general election, and we agreed a programme of initial reforms, including ringfencing customers' money that is earmarked for investment, so that it cannot be diverted and spent on undeserved multimillion-pound bonuses or dividend payments. We also have the Water (Special Measures) Bill going through the House of Lords right now, which will ban the payment of those undeserved bonuses. It is important that we understand exactly what has gone wrong in the sector that has led to a situation where regulation does not meet the requirements of the public, businesses, the economy or the environment. Key proposals will be coming out of the commission on those issues, and I hope the hon. Lady will welcome them when they come forward.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Today, a report found that rivers in the east and in London have the worst water quality in the UK, with an alarming amount of chemicals found. Citizen science has played a key role up to now in monitoring the quality of our water, so will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to citizen scientists and volunteers and assure us that their voices will be heard in this important work?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The many campaign groups and citizen scientists have had a huge impact on raising the profile of the sewage scandal affecting our country and in pointing to some of the ways in which we can start to fix things. Sir Jon's commission will have an advisory group with representation from campaign groups and consumers. There will also be wide engagement with the public, both through the work of the commission itself and subsequently, as we work towards the reform legislation that will reset the sector once and for all.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): In the absence of a plan, it is always a good idea to do a review. My constituents are being failed by our local sewage infrastructure—Thames Water is a total and utter disgrace. However, I really welcome the Secretary of State's statement, because I think I have found an unlikely ally. The Labour Government will force through building on the green belt in my constituency, with a whole host of new houses—a situation exacerbated by the failure of the Liberal Democrat administration in Elmbridge to deliver a local plan. Given the time it will take the commission to report back, and given that these new houses will require more sewerage, does the Secretary of State agree that we should pause and think again about the house building targets until the review has been completed?

Steve Reed: I thought the hon. Gentleman was standing up to apologise for the fact that the Conservative Government did absolutely nothing for 14 years, other than watch the torrent of effluent going into our rivers, lakes and seas increase and pollute them. My hon. Friend the Water Minister would be more than happy to meet him to discuss the issues that he raises in his constituency.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I welcome the commission announced by my right hon. Friend. Last week, six beaches in my constituency were affected by raw sewage dumping, with two of them—Joss Bay and Stone Bay—experiencing a bad effect on their bathing water quality, but the verdict was that they were still within Environment Agency permitted limits. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the commission will investigate regulatory standards, so that when raw sewage is dumped, there is actually a fine and a punishment for the water companies? I must also make a declaration as a customer of Southern Water and a sea water swimmer.

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She is, of course, a well-known environmental campaigner who stands up for her constituents and for the many businesses, including tourism businesses, that are adversely affected by the appalling state of our waters. It is clear that regulation and governance have been inadequate for a long time. This is a reset moment, where we can finally strengthen those things and deliver the clean water that her constituents, mine and those of all Members across the House expect to see.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Diolch, Mr Llefarydd. Water is devolved, but we in Wales do not have the full range of powers needed to address this scandal. For example, the Senedd cannot regulate the transfer of water by private companies whose catchment area straddles the border, which of course includes the likes of Hafren Dyfrdwy. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the commission considers the full devolution of powers over water and sewage licensing to Wales to empower the Senedd to set higher targets?

Steve Reed: Diolch yn fawr. The commission is jointly set up by the UK Government and the Welsh Government, and it will report back to both. It will inform the actions that both Governments take subsequently, including looking at infrastructure and how we make catchment areas operate better, particularly when they cross borders, as so many do between England and Wales.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the launch of the independent water commission. I know my constituents in Sheffield Central will welcome the review. They are seeing a 25% rise in their bills, but that does not make sense to them when shareholders continue to receive profits. Will the Secretary of State provide an assurance that as an outcome of the review there will be transparency, water companies will be held to account and we will reset the focus on consumers instead of company profit?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Consumers must have a strong voice on the commission. They will gain that through consumer representation on the advisory group that will be working with Sir Jon, as the commissioner. She points to the eye-watering level of bill increases already proposed by Ofwat; alas, they are the price of Tory failure. The Tories allowed the water infrastructure to collapse to such an extent that it costs much more to fix it now than it would have cost had it been maintained properly through those 14 years. I cannot undo the damage they caused, but I can draw a line in the sand to ensure it never happens again.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): When the Conservatives privatised water, they created risk-free, money-printing emporiums that could pollute our coasts, including my west Cornwall coast, at their convenience. Although the Secretary of State says that nationalisation is not in scope—one can understand why—to what extent will company governance be in scope? Will it be possible to move companies closer to becoming community benefit societies, or at least to installing a community environmental champion, not in the pay of the company, on every board, to keep watch on the company?

Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman makes important points. The areas he refers to will be in scope for the commission. I hope he will make his own representations to ensure those points are heard and fully considered before we get the findings in the summer of next year.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Residents in my constituency have been disgusted by the degradation of our rural waterways across the east of England, as well as by the hollowing out of reservoir capacity across the country. I welcome the new Government and the new Secretary of State's renewed leadership on these issues, but it is clear that under the previous Government weakened regulation and regulators played their part in facilitating the mess we have inherited. What assurances can he give my constituents that we will be beefing up the regulators and giving them the power they need to take the action we all want to see?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the previous Government deliberately weakened the regulators. They kept regulation too weak to hold the water companies to account and to ensure that we got the investment which could have maintained a better standard of infrastructure and stopped the level of pollution that his and everyone else's constituents have had to face. We have already taken steps through the Water (Special Measures) Bill to give the regulator more teeth. The commission will be looking root and branch at the role of regulation, governance and the regulator, to ensure we have a system that is fit for the future that will guarantee clean water for decades to come.

Ellie Chown (North Herefordshire) (Green): If I heard correctly, at the start of his statement the Secretary of State referred to the River Lugg, which runs through the centre of my constituency. Its catchment has been subject to a planning moratorium for more than five years, because of excess levels of phosphates in the river. The Secretary of State will be well aware that the reason for that is not primarily sewage pollution, but agricultural run-off; more than two thirds of the pollution is from agricultural run-off and only a quarter from sewage. However, the terms of reference for the Government's water commission essentially make no mention of agriculture, with only a passing reference and nothing specific about addressing that problem; likewise the Water (Special Measures) Bill. With such a narrow approach to addressing water pollution, the Secretary of State will not be able to achieve his aim of cleaning up our rivers and seas. Does he agree that the terms of reference need to be changed to incorporate full attention on agricultural pollution as well as sewage?

Steve Reed: I hope the hon. Lady will look at the terms of reference, which are available at gov.uk. They focus on the whole catchment area of rivers and include

agricultural run-off, which accounts for 45% of water pollution. Where there is an interface between agriculture and polluted water, that is indeed in scope for the work of the commission.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. The contamination and destruction of our waterways, and even of our high streets, as we saw with sewage pollution in Newquay the other week, is an absolute disgrace that the previous Government failed to address. With Pennon Group, the owner of South West Water, paying £112 million in dividends and over £160 million in other finance costs, will the Secretary of State ensure that the independent commission, which I greatly welcome, addresses whether we have effective funding models for our water industry?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; it is disgusting for people to see sewage bubbling up, and not just in their high streets but even in their gardens, because of broken water infrastructure. We will be looking for a reset so that we can have a water sector that works for customers and the environment, as well as investors.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): The year 2 pupils of Bishop Tufnell school in my constituency told me how disappointed they were not to be able to swim in the sea on their summer day out last year. As a fellow sea swimmer, I share their disappointment. Winter is coming and there is no time to waste. Pushing the can down the track with this commission is not good enough. Having reviewed the activities in my constituency, I want to know how the Secretary of State will provide a strategic overview that brings together all the different agencies that impact this matter, and not some time next year but before the real issues hit every single constituency around the coast of the country right now?

Steve Reed: I am very sorry for the year 2 pupils at the school the hon. Lady mentioned. I respectfully remind her that she represents the party that sat back and did nothing for 14 years, while the levels of pollution in our rivers, lakes and seas got far worse. That, I venture to suggest, is why those year 2 pupils cannot go in the water.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Sewage polluting Cornish beaches such as those in my constituency—specifically, St Agnes, where Surfers Against Sewage has its head office, Perranporth and Portreath—is yet another Conservative scandal that has damaged our economy and society for years, and that a Labour Government will now have to clear up. Does the Minister agree that as well as the economic damage, the damage to the mental health of those of us who cannot regularly use the sea should not be underestimated? Will the commission consider the mental health benefits as part of its work?

Steve Reed: I had the pleasure of visiting my hon. Friend's constituency with him during the summer. I saw for myself the impact of sewage in the sea on the beautiful beaches around his part of Cornwall. Of course, it is not unusual for a Labour Government to have to come in and clean up the Tories' mess, but rarely quite so literally as in the case of sewage in our waterways.

He makes an important point about mental health. I hope he will feed that back to the commission because it is important it hears all sorts of views about the impact of polluted water as it considers how we can best clean it up.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Since I was elected in July, Exmouth and Exeter East has been hit by significant sewage issues. I am sure the Secretary of State will understand that and I have written to him recently outlining some of those issues. Although the commission may bear fruit in future years, there are areas of the country, such as my constituency, that need immediate fixes. Will the Secretary of State meet me and the chief executive of South West Water to ensure that immediate fixes are put in place and maximum pressure is applied, so that we have the fixes we need and do not have to endure another summer like the one we have just had?

Steve Reed: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place and to this House. I hope Conservative Members will engage constructively with the commission, so that he can feed in his views directly. My hon. Friend the Minister for Water and Flooding is happy to meet him to discuss his local issues.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): My constituents do not think that Yorkshire Water is doing a good job. Last year, sewage was discharged into the River Calder 4,125 times. The same year, Nichola Shaw, the boss, chose to take home a bonus of £371,000—or £90 per discharge. We have also had three major flooding incidents in Calder Valley over the past 15 years. Regulations do not cover water companies acting against flooding. Will my right hon. Friend look at the breadth of the current regulations and at what water companies can do about flooding?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Water (Special Measures) Bill, which is currently going through the House of Lords and will soon be in this House, looks at how undeserved bonuses can be banned. The public quite rightly feel a sense of injustice that failure is being rewarded, when clearly it should not be. The points he makes about flooding are well made, and I hope he will feed those into the work of the commission as it starts its work.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Environment Agency used to be responsible for monitoring sewage discharges, but for more than a decade now the water companies have had the responsibility for monitoring releases via storm overflows. In the previous Parliament, the Environmental Audit Committee heard that illegal spills may have been 10 times greater than that declared by the water companies. Will the new commission consider removing from water companies the monitoring of sewage discharges, or will it let them mark their own homework, as the previous Government did?

Steve Reed: There has been a wide failure in the regulation of water. That is why I have asked Sir Jon Cunliffe, as part of the commission that he is leading, to look at regulation and the roles of the regulators—not just one of them—to ensure that we have a system that is fit for purpose. We are ensuring that, outside the

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commission, there is mandatory monitoring of what is coming out of all overflows, including emergency overflows. In the Water (Special Measures) Bill, water chief executives will be required to be open and transparent about the extent of pollution; otherwise, they will face personal criminal liability for the first time.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): In 2024 alone, Hartlepool's beautiful coastline has been marred by 49 separate incidents of sewage being discharged into our sea. At the same time, the water companies are making billions in profit. Whatever the outcome of the commission, can the Secretary of State commit to putting people in Hartlepool and across the country ahead of profit in cleaning up this mess?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; this sewage scandal affects the entire country, including his constituency of Hartlepool. It is important that this commission focuses on ensuring that consumers and the environment come first, and that we have a water sector that serves their interests primarily. I hope that he will make his points directly to the commission, because they will value hearing from him.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I was a brand-new parent when South East Water cut off the water for six days for me and for thousands of my constituents. South East Water is 74% in debt—it is the second most indebted company in the land. Its current investment plans rely on taking on more debt, which is then paid for through increased customer bills. Clearly, that is unsustainable not just for the companies, but for the customers because of their ever-rising bills. Will the Secretary of State assure me that this commission will make suggestions for reducing the indebtedness of water companies?

Steve Reed: That is an important point. The commission will be looking at the financial viability of water companies, including their levels of indebtedness. The hon. Member also made the important point about what happens when water companies cut off supplies, because, frankly, compensation to individual households and businesses has been inadequate. That is something that we seek to address through the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which is going through Parliament right now, so it need not wait for the commission.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): The village of Upper Tean, which the Secretary of State may remember, has experienced flooding, burst drains, and sewage flooding into rivers and streams, killing them, for many years. And recently residents had to turn out en masse in the middle of the night to divert traffic away when the village was overwhelmed by quite a serious and urgent flood. Following meetings with the Environment Agency, the parish council is looking into developing a flood action group, so that it can provide the resilience and the powerful voice to take action against water companies such as Severn Trent. Will the Secretary of State assure me that the commission will look at how communities such as that of Upper Tean can build the resilience they need and also help them develop a flood action group?

Steve Reed: I remember very well and with pleasure the visit to which my hon. Friend refers. I also remember how distressed residents were to see their homes flooded and their possessions destroyed. Very often their homes were uninsurable, because of where they were located. The commission will consider all those factors. My hon. Friend the Water and Flooding Minister and I are also looking at what can be done separately to tackle the scourge of flooding to better protect communities now and into the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I will try to get in as many people as I can, so can we please keep the questions and answers as snappy as possible?

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The statement from the Secretary of State is welcome, but passionate campaigners in my constituency will be concerned that, when we already know the dire state of our rivers and water courses, a review will potentially push the can down the road and delay the changes that we so desperately need. Will the commission set a deadline by which water companies have to prevent all sewage discharges in sensitive sites, including chalk streams such as the Lavant and Ems in my constituency?

Steve Reed: We certainly know the dire state of our waterways. We also need to know in detail the root and branch reforms required to make the corrections. We will have that from this commission by next summer, and I hope the hon. Lady will take part in that. We need to clean up all of our waterways, including those very important ones to which she refers.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): This weekend, I met the Fillongley flood action group, a small group of brave men and women who, when they receive notifications about floods, put on their waders in the middle of the night and go out and clear a culvert that is not fit for purpose. Will the Secretary of State join me in applauding their efforts? Will he also reassure them that this commission will look across all Departments to see how we can best ensure that those culverts can accommodate the overflow from things such as smart motorways, as I am hearing that the floods have got worse since the M6 was allowed to become a smart motorway. Will it also consider the economic impact on those villages when shops, hairdressers and the local pubs close, sometimes on a permanent basis?

Steve Reed: I thank the residents of my hon. Friend's constituency and those in other constituencies who are taking action for themselves against flooding. We have already set up and held the first meeting of the flood resilience taskforce, which will be seeking to provide better co-ordination between central Government—where the resources are held—and those local agencies on the ground charged with improving work to protect people from the very damaging effects of serious flooding.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Last year, water company bosses in England and Wales were paid £9.1 million in bonuses. That is while Thames Water proposes a 59% increase in customer bills by 2030. Does the Secretary of State therefore understand why many residents in our constituencies have lost faith in the

regulator's ability to control these powerful firms and will he commit to replacing the regulator with one that has some teeth?

Steve Reed: I certainly agree that residents have lost confidence not just in the regulators but in the water system at large, which is why we have set up this commission to look at how we can get regulation that is fit for purpose for the future.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Diolch, Secretary of State. Monmouthshire must be one of the only constituencies in the UK that did not get a visit from the Secretary of State, but we did get a visit from Feargal Sharkey, which was great. I really welcome the announcement today, especially this new partnership between the Welsh and UK Governments, which, unfortunately, the Conservative Government completely failed to achieve. For example, they brought out the River Wye action plan, which failed to include Wales and had no new money. May I ask the Secretary of State to relook at that action plan, commit to a new one that uses the River Wye catchment partnership groups, the Friends of the River Wye, and all the different civil servants from both sides of the border. Let us then use that group and help clear up the River Wye.

Steve Reed: Diolch yn fawr i chi. I would be very happy to visit Monmouthshire. It is important that we look at the situation with water across catchments, particularly where it is crossing borders between England and Wales. The fact that this commission is jointly commissioned by both Governments and will report to both Governments will ensure that is what happens.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I am pleased to see action coming forward from the Government on this, but we know that they need to go further and faster on this issue. In North Norfolk, much of the infrastructure dates from the 1970s and 1980s. Then, a just-about-managing approach was taken to construction and clearly it is no longer managing the situation. Can the Minister confirm that this commission will look specifically at directing investment from water companies to infrastructure upgrades as and where they are needed?

Steve Reed: We certainly need fast action after 14 years of absolutely nothing. The commission will point the way to resetting the sector for the future, and will seek to establish a system that will do exactly what the hon. Gentleman talks about.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Hundreds of residents in Ruislip Gardens and Ruislip Manor in my constituency have been flooded in recent weeks. I have met many of them who have had to move out of their homes. They are frustrated by poor regulation and buck-passing between the water authority and the local council, the flood management authority. This welcome review, after 14 years of dither and delay, is good news for my residents, but will my right hon. Friend assure me and my residents that it will look specifically at the adequacy of governance and accountability mechanisms between flood management authorities and water management organisations, and will he meet with me and my constituents to discuss these issues?

Steve Reed: I have had the pleasure of visiting my hon. Friend's constituency many times over the past year, and I know what a concern flooding is to people living there. We have already set up a flood resilience taskforce, which will ensure better co-ordination between the centre, where resources are held, and agencies on the frontline, including those to which he refers, to ensure that people are better protected from the impact of flooding. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Water Minister will be happy to meet with him to talk about local flooding.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. If we are short and sharp, we can probably wrap up proceedings on this statement in the next several minutes, with everybody getting in. Jim Shannon, show us how it is done.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Short and sharp—my goodness, what a challenge.

It is great news that accountability will, at last, be at heart of this review. Northern Ireland is in a similar situation regarding water, though it is a slightly different scenario, with a Government-owned operator. Will the Secretary of State indicate how the review can help to deliver a UK-wide water service that is truly fit for purpose?

Steve Reed: It is always a pleasure to hear from the hon. Gentleman. Of course water is devolved in Northern Ireland. It will be for the local authorities there to make their own decisions about how to correct problems in beauty spots such as Lough Neagh.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): My constituency is made up of 21 local government wards. One of them, Bagots and Needwood, was subjected to 3,000 hours of sewage spills in just one year. Can the Secretary of State assure me that, after 14 years of failure from the Conservative party, the commission will leave nowhere to hide for criminal water bosses?

Steve Reed: That is absolutely the intention.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): As a whitewater kayaker, I spend countless hours on rivers and streams up and down the country, so I know that both the Environment Agency and Ofwat need to be properly resourced if we are to clear up the toxic legacy left in our waterways by the last Government. Can the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that the newly announced independent water commission will look at resourcing to ensure that the water firms responsible for polluting our waterways are held to account?

Steve Reed: The commission will look at identifying a model of appropriate and effective regulation for precisely the reasons my hon. Friend outlines.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): My constituents in North East Derbyshire are rightly disgusted that water bosses received over £41 million in bonuses and other incentives under the previous Conservative Government. Can the Secretary of State assure me that every penny of my constituents' hard-earned money will be spent where it is needed?

Steve Reed: We have already announced plans to ringfence money earmarked for investment so that it cannot be diverted for undeserved multimillion-pound bonuses, as happened so frequently under the previous failed Conservative Government.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): The chalk streams in North East Hertfordshire and across England are of international significance, but too often these waterways are not just polluted, but running dry. Will the Secretary of State assure me that the commission will look at the regulation needed to bring an end to not only sewage spills, but the over-abstraction of aquifers and chalk streams?

Steve Reed: The commission has a wide remit, and will look at the wider impact of damage to the water system, which got much worse under the previous Government.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As a coastal city, we welcome the commission. It is vital to sort out sewage and floods. In my constituency, parts of Drayton and Farlington are affected by floods—not from rivers or the sea, but because water pumps up through the drains. While it is not sewage, the water cascades down the streets into houses and shops, forcing holidaymakers to check whether they need to get people to put sandbags out to protect their property. Will the Secretary of State ensure that those types of floods are included in the remit of the commission, and that water companies take responsibility?

Steve Reed: We have also set up a flood resilience taskforce, which is looking precisely at those kinds of problems related to flooding so that we can take action immediately.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): Toothless water regulators have been left up the creek. Can the Secretary of State confirm that Sir Jon Cunliffe will look at scrapping and replacing Ofwat?

Steve Reed: It will be for the commission to look at how we get to an effective and appropriate model of regulation, including the roles of the regulators.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The River Weaver, which runs through the town of Nantwich in my constituency, suffered from a spate of devastating pollution last year, killing hundreds of fish and blighting our beautiful market town. It is believed that the cause of the pollution was slurry dumping from intense agriculture. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the engagement and support that farmers need to dispose of slurry mix in the appropriate way will form part of the review?

Steve Reed: Yes, the impact of run-off from agriculture will be in the scope of the commission's work.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, had the Conservative party put as much energy into protecting our rivers, lakes and seas as it has into filling its reservoirs of chutzpah, my constituents in Rugby would not be living with the consequences of ineffective regulation, undue profits and unearned bonuses, and that, as in so many areas, the Labour party is clearing up the mess that we inherited?

Steve Reed: The short answer to that is yes.

Police Accountability

1.36 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before I call the Home Secretary to make her statement, I inform the House that the inquest into the death of Chris Kaba has been opened and adjourned. The matter is therefore technically still before the courts. However, Mr Speaker has granted a waiver in relation to the House's resolution on matters sub judice, so Members may refer to it in the House's proceedings.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on Monday's verdict in the trial of Sergeant Martyn Blake, on the accountability review into police use of force, and on confidence in policing. Chris Kaba was killed in Streatham two years ago. His parents and family of course continue to experience deep grief and distress. A year ago, Sergeant Martyn Blake was charged with murder, and on Monday, the jury returned its verdict and Sergeant Blake was acquitted. It is imperative that the jury's verdict is respected, and that Sergeant Blake and his family are given the time and space that they will need to recover from what will have been an immensely difficult experience for them during both the investigation and the trial.

For an armed police officer to be prosecuted for actions taken in the course of their duties is very rare, so of course this case has raised considerable concerns for the public and for the police. The decisions made on any individual case, be it by the police, the Independent Office for Police Conduct, the Crown Prosecution Service, the courts or a jury, are rightly independent of the Government, so it would not be right for me to comment further on the details of the case. However, the case has happened against a backdrop of wider and long-standing concerns about accountability, standards and confidence—a backdrop in which police officers and forces have raised long-standing concerns about the way in which the accountability system currently operates, particularly in cases of specialist policing such as firearms and driving, where we ask officers to do incredibly difficult and dangerous jobs to keep us safe, and a backdrop of fallen community confidence in policing and the criminal justice system across the country, with, as the Metropolitan Police Commissioner said this week, lower confidence among black communities.

The British policing model relies on mutual bonds of trust between the public and the police. For our policing model to work, it is essential that the police have the confidence of the communities they serve, and that officers have the confidence that they need to do their vital and often extremely difficult job of keeping us all safe. Too often in recent times, both elements of that confidence have become frayed. The Government have made it a mission to put confidence back into policing.

As part of that work, I want to update the House on new measures that we will take forward in response to the accountability review and following ongoing work to respond to issues raised by the Angiolini and Casey reviews. That will be a package of reforms to rebuild confidence for police officers and for communities, to tackle the unacceptable delays and confusion in the system,

and to ensure that the complexity of specialist operations is considered at an early stage and that the highest standards are upheld and maintained.

Twelve months ago, the previous Government launched a review into the accountability systems for police use of force and police driving. The previous Home Secretary set out an interim response in March, which the Labour party supported, and I welcome his work. The review was not completed by the election, and although we have continued to draw on evidence from police and civil society organisations, we were unable to say more publicly in the run-up to the trial, so today I will update the House.

The accountability review found that the current system for holding police officers to account is not commanding the confidence of either the public or the police. Accountability and misconduct proceedings are too often plagued by delays stretching for years, which is damaging for complainants, police officers and police forces alike. The system has become more complex, with confusion over multiple thresholds for different investigations, and a lack of clarity, especially on specialist capabilities.

There are also wider concerns about the misconduct system. The focus when things go wrong can end up being entirely on the decisions of the individual officer, so system failings such as poor training, unmanageable caseloads or wider force practices are not sufficiently considered or followed up, meaning that too little changes. At the same time, as we saw following the Casey and Angiolini reviews, in cases where someone is not fit to be a police officer, it is too hard for forces to remove them, and communities feel that no one is held to account. The public must be able to expect that when officers exceed the lawful use of their powers or fail to meet proper standards, there will be rapid and robust processes in place to hold them to account. Police officers who act with integrity and bravery to keep us safe each day need to know they have strong public support. If officers lack the confidence to use their powers, following their training and the law, public safety is put at risk.

Let me turn to the policy measures. First, we will take forward the three measures proposed by the previous Government in March to strengthen and speed up the system. We will align the threshold for the referral of police officers from the Independent Office for Police Conduct to the Crown Prosecution Service to that used by the police when referring cases involving members of the public. Currently the threshold is lower for police officers—that is not justified. We will allow the IOPC to send cases to the CPS where there is sufficient evidence to do so, instead of having to wait for a final investigation report. And we will also put the IOPC victims' right-to-review policy on a statutory footing to ensure that there is an appeal mechanism for bereaved families when a decision is made not to seek a charging decision.

Then we will go further. When officers act in the most dangerous situations on behalf of the state, it is vital that those officers and their families are not put in further danger during any subsequent legal proceedings. We will therefore introduce a presumption of anonymity for firearms officers subject to criminal trial following a police shooting in the course of their professional duties, up to the point of conviction. We will also ensure that the highly specialist nature of particular policing tactics and tools is reflected in relevant investigative guidance.

[Yvette Cooper]

That includes ensuring that in investigations of police-driving incidents, evidence from subject-matter experts and in-car video footage is considered at the earliest possible opportunity, and, more widely, that an officer's compliance with their training and guidance is appropriately taken into account in investigative decision making.

I also have established a rapid review of two specific areas where recent legal judgments have meant that we now have different thresholds for criminal, misconduct and inquest investigations, adding complexity, confusion and delay to the system. In particular, that review will consider the legal test for use of force in misconduct proceedings, and the threshold for determining short-form findings of unlawful killing in inquests. The independent review will be conducted by Tim Godwin and Sir Adrian Fulford, and will report jointly to me and the Lord Chancellor by the end of January.

I have asked for further work to be done on timeliness, standards and misconduct procedures as part of our wider policing reforms. My right hon. Friend the Attorney General has invited the Director of Public Prosecutions to examine the CPS guidance and processes in relation to charging police officers for offences committed in the course of their duties. Following calls from civil society organisations, we will ask the College of Policing to establish a national "lessons learned" database for deaths or serious injuries arising from police contact or police pursuits, so that when tragic incidents occur, there is a responsibility to ensure that lessons are incorporated into the development of police training and guidance, and to prevent the repetition of such events.

To rebuild public confidence in the wider standards regime for policing, we also need to ensure that there is faster progress in responding to the findings of the Angiolini and Casey reviews on vetting and standards. We will therefore take forward in this parliamentary Session previously agreed proposals to ensure that officers convicted of certain criminal offences are automatically found to have committed gross misconduct; to create a presumption of dismissal where gross misconduct is found; and to change regulations to enable chief constables to promptly dismiss officers who fail their vetting—there has been a glaring gap in the system there for far too long. We will go further to ensure that standards are upheld: we will ensure that there is a statutory underpinning for national vetting standards, and strengthen requirements relating to the suspension of officers under investigation for domestic abuse or sexual offences.

Finally, we need wider measures to restore confidence in policing and the criminal justice system across all communities. That must include further work to take forward the Met's London race action plan, on which action has already been taken, though the Met commissioner and the Mayor for London have made it clear that there is much more work to do. We need progress from the National Police Chiefs' Council on the national police race action plan. The Government are also determined to take forward further measures, ranging from the introduction of neighbourhood policing to new police force performance standards, to strengthen confidence in policing in every community across the country.

The measures that I have outlined are practical steps to rebuild confidence, tackle delays, provide clarity and ensure that high standards are maintained. For almost

200 years, policing by consent has been the bedrock of British policing. The Government are determined to take the necessary action to strengthen public confidence in the police, and to strengthen the confidence of the police when they are out on the street every day, doing the difficult job of keeping us all safe. Those are the twin goals that we must all work towards. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Home Secretary.

1.47 pm

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement, and for the recent Privy Council briefing that I received from her.

I very much welcome what the Home Secretary has set out. I agree with almost all of it and disagree with almost none of it. As a society, we demand that our firearms officers put themselves in dangerous and difficult situations to protect others. Every firearms officer in the UK is a volunteer, and although we rightly value having have a predominantly unarmed police force, we do of course need a cadre of armed police officers across the country.

I have had the privilege of visiting the police firearms training centre in Gravesend, and I have seen at first hand just how rigorous that firearms training regime is—not just in marksmanship, but in the use of judgment. Split-second life-or-death decisions must be made, often in circumstances in which the risk picture is incomplete and the cost of not acting is considerably more severe than the cost of acting. In all our debate and conversation about the use of force by police, that fundamental truth should be at the forefront of our minds.

As the right hon. Lady said, we rightly expect that all officers will act with restraint and professionalism at all times, but we cannot allow circumstances to be created in which officers are disincentivised from being decisive, or become unwilling to take the right action for fear of trial by media or a long period of suspension under investigation.

I am grateful to the Home Secretary for acknowledging in her statement that when my party was in government—under my predecessors and led predominantly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp)—we initiated a review of the use of force by police officers and the accountability regime. I am genuinely grateful that, under the Home Secretary's leadership, the review is continuing. As she says, giving confidence to police officers, so that they can act in accordance with their training and not be penalised for those actions, is absolutely key. Simultaneously ensuring that the public have confidence that police officers still have an appropriate accountability framework is equally important. She made the point that both those aims are being pursued in the accountability review that she is taking forward.

The commitment that such investigations will be more speedy is key. Specifically, it is important that the Home Secretary continues with the Conservatives' proposal to allow the IOPC to refer cases to the CPS earlier. Prolonged periods of uncertainty undermine the confidence of both police officers and the public they serve. I am pleased to see that the Government are continuing with

our reforms to ensure that when police officers act in accordance with their training, and in the line of duty, they are not subject to a lower threshold for prosecutions than members of the general public. I ask the Home Secretary to seriously consider ensuring that training in those roles forms a legitimate part of the defence of officers if and when criminal prosecutions are brought forward.

I particularly welcome the move to introduce a presumption of anonymity for firearms officers subject to criminal trial following a shooting. We now know that Chris Kaba was involved with a violent gang, and that Sergeant Blake and his family had—and still have—a well founded fear of violent reprisals. That fear was amplified when Sergeant Blake's name was put in the public domain.

In the light of the review by Dr Gillian Fairfield, what further recommendations is the Home Secretary minded to take forward? Does she recognise that in the era of social media, all people of public profile, including Members of this House, should be very thoughtful and careful about making public statements when facts are unknown or contested? The police should know instinctively that they will have the backing of both their chain of command and the politicians involved in their governance, at all levels, when they do the right thing at our behest, and that they will be backed by their chain of command even if those actions are not popular or convenient. We have too often seen police leadership bend to inappropriate levels of public pressure.

In conclusion, I welcome the statement from the Home Secretary, and her commitment to taking forward the reforms of the police accountability review. Conservative Members will work constructively with her to ensure that the appropriate balance is struck to reinforce confidence in policing, and the confidence of police.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the shadow Home Secretary for his response. I hope that there will be widespread agreement on both sides of the House on the importance of these issues, which go to the heart of the British tradition of policing by consent. All of us want to know that there is proper accountability for decisions that police forces and officers make, but also that the police have the confidence to take what are sometimes the most difficult decisions of all to keep the rest of us safe.

The shadow Home Secretary is right that firearms officers have to deal with some of the most difficult parts of policing, sometimes having to make split-second decisions in fast-moving and difficult circumstances that none of us would want to be in. Frankly, if any of us were in those situations, we would want to know that there were firearms police officers there to protect and support us.

In the UK, police officers discharging firearms is very rare, particularly compared with other countries. That reflects the nature of our unarmed policing tradition, as well as the professionalism and training of the police, and the different ways in which they manage often very difficult situations, but of course they need to know that when they follow their training and operate within the law, they will have our support for the difficult decisions that they have to take, and will not find their lives upturned as a result. The anonymity provisions are important, and I hope that they will have support from

the whole House. The Government want to bring in the presumption of anonymity in the forthcoming crime and policing Bill.

The shadow Home Secretary also raised the issue of training. I want that to be looked at when the investigative guidance is updated; that way, it can be addressed relatively quickly to ensure that issues around police driving and training more widely are taken into account in early investigative decisions before cases are pursued.

On the Fairfield review, we are taking forward further measures, and will look, in wider policing reforms, at how the IOPC needs to work. It is important that we continue to have an independent process. That has to be set against the backdrop of the wider policing reforms that are needed to ensure that we strengthen confidence for both officers and communities. That is how we will maintain for the new generation the proud British tradition of policing by consent.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nurat Ghani): I call the Mother of the House, Diane Abbott.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): First, I express my sympathy for Chris Kaba's family and his mother. Whatever he was or did, he was her son, and she deserves our sympathy and respect. I also acknowledge my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), who has worked hard to support the family in challenging circumstances. In the past few days there has been an avalanche of information about Chris Kaba, but I say to those who are asking why that information was not made available to the jury: that was the decision of the judge, and they should put their complaints to him.

The Home Secretary will know that over the years there have been a series of deaths at the hands of the Metropolitan police that have led to deep unhappiness and even riots. One death that comes to mind is that of Cynthia Jarrett in 1985, who died of a heart attack when four policemen burst into her house, and whose death triggered the Broadwater Farm riots. Does the Home Secretary accept that nothing could be more damaging for police-community relations than if the idea took hold that in some way the police were above the law?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my right hon. Friend for her points. I know that she has worked on and addressed these issues over many years, and how important she sees them as being. She is right to raise concerns around incidents where lives are lost, and to recognise the distress that will be felt by Chris Kaba's mother and family. I also recognise the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) has done to support the family in difficult circumstances.

My right hon. Friend makes an important point: at every stage in the process, these decisions have to be for the independent judiciary, the courts and the police prosecutors. Our role in this House is to provide the framework within which those individual decisions are then made, but I also agree that ultimately, all these measures have to have the confidence of communities across London and across the country. If they do not, that proud British tradition of policing by consent is lost, which is deeply damaging for police officers and policing, as well as for all our public safety.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I also thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement.

Any case in which a young person's life is cut short is a tragedy, and my thoughts are with all those who are impacted by this awful situation. It is crucial that we in this place respect the judiciary and their right to make decisions without political interference. However, a case like this one does not happen in a vacuum—we must remember the wider context. As Baroness Casey said in her review, black Londoners are “under-protected and over-policed”. A huge and radical step is required to regain police legitimacy and trust among London's black communities. Those findings cannot and should not be ignored, which means working together to rebuild community relationships and trust in the police, something that is vital to the very fabric of policing by consent.

With that in mind, I welcome the Home Secretary's commitment to pick up the accountability review. When it comes to firearms officers' accountability when operating under enormous pressure, ambiguity benefits nobody—not police officers, and certainly not our communities. I would, however, welcome more details from the Home Secretary about how those communities with the least trust in the police, especially ethnic minority communities, will be consulted in this review. These questions extend past the Met, so will other police forces—including my own Greater Manchester police—be involved in the review, and will the Home Secretary commit to commission an independent review of the implementation of the Casey review's recommendations? Rebuilding trust in the police has got to be our priority, for the sake of our whole community and for ethnic minority communities, and for the officers who are working hard to keep us safe in difficult circumstances.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for the important points she has made. She is right that lack of clarity, uncertainty, and the long and damaging delays that we have had in the system benefit no one, but she is also right to say that part of the sensitivity around this case—part of its long-standing backdrop—is the much lower confidence in policing among black Londoners and the different levels of confidence around race. That was highlighted as part of the Casey review, and it is why the Met police have set out a race action plan, but both the Met commissioner and the Mayor of London have been clear that there is significant additional work to do. If any measures do not have the confidence of all communities that the police serve, that will ultimately undermine the crucial principle of policing by consent.

We continue to work to ensure that some of the measures recommended by the Casey review that have national implications, as well as the Angiolini review, are taken forward as part of this package. Those include issues with vetting and misconduct processes—it is important that we make progress on those measures, as well as on some of the issues that arise from the accountability review. We will also ensure that all communities are involved in the way in which measures are taken forward.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): The fatal shooting of Chris Kaba caused pain to his family and considerable fear and anger, not only in my

community but across London. This House must understand that the concerns being raised are not anti-police, but pro-accountability. We must respect our legal processes, and it is extremely rare that police officers ever face such prosecution. The Home Secretary clearly agrees that while police officers work under exceptional pressures, any loss of life following police contact must be properly investigated, so is she concerned by comments from the Metropolitan police commissioner regarding disciplinary processes, including that firearms officers should be exempt from criminal charges over fatal shootings? That would do nothing to rebuild broken trust and confidence, particularly within the black community, who have been disproportionately impacted. Following the Angiolini and Casey reviews, is less accountability the route that the head of the Met should be asking for?

Yvette Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for her question—as I said, she has worked hard to represent her communities. It is clear that there must be a proper framework for legal accountability for police forces and individual officers. There must always be investigations where there is loss of life following police contact—that is always appropriate. Although we want investigations to take place much more swiftly, all the police chiefs whom I have talked to as part of this work feel strongly that there must be a clear accountability system, which provides confidence to communities and to police officers who make difficult decisions in the line of duty. Police, Parliament and the public will recognise that we need to have the confidence of communities, as well as police officers who are confident that they will be able to do their job.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and for advance sight of it. Although the measures that she has announced are welcome, many of them will take time to introduce. In the meantime, what is she doing to ensure confidence throughout the system, and will she ensure that the Home Affairs Committee is kept updated on progress in making these welcome changes?

Yvette Cooper: I thank the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee for those important points. We are working at pace: we have set out planned legislation in the King's Speech—the crime and policing Bill—and there are a series of areas where we believe these measures can be taken forward as part of that process. In some areas, we may be able to make progress through regulations; in others, it is simply about changing the guidance. We have set out some timetables as part of the briefing, which will be made public. Everybody who wants more detail on the individual measures will be able to find that information on the Home Office website. This afternoon I will ensure that all those details are sent to the Home Affairs Committee.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy). Shortly after the tragic shooting, she organised a meeting with

the family of Chris Kaba. No matter what we think about an individual, we must remember that for any parent, burying their child is tragic; I met Prosper and Helen, and the pain in their eyes at what had happened will not leave me. I also pay tribute to our officers across Lambeth and Southwark, who work very hard with our community to build community relations. In our borough, often some of the issues are caused by police officers who come in from outside, but the police officers who know our patch work very hard. Against the backdrop of longer-standing concerns about accountability, and following the Casey review's findings on the issue of institutional racism, will the Home Secretary continue to hold the Met police to account for their progress on the race action plan?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point: we need to see progress on the Met police's race action plan, which responds to serious findings in the Casey review. That review raised wider issues as well, but it is essential that that action is taken. Both the Mayor and the Met commissioner have made strong commitments to ensure progress continues to be made, and I know that London MPs will also want to see that action taken. We cannot have reports released without follow-up.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I very much welcome the Home Secretary's statement. There is a lot of concern in my constituency about the fact that Sergeant Blake was prosecuted in the first place. We are all conscious of the amazing work of our wonderful police to keep us safe every day, so will the Home Secretary set out in more detail what additional protections will be introduced to ensure that our police are protected as they go about their job of protecting us?

Yvette Cooper: I thank the right hon. Member for his question. Under the reforms that we have set out following wide examination of the different evidence, where there are investigations—and there will need to be investigations in individual cases—they can happen much more speedily. The threshold for referring cases from the Independent Office for Police Conduct to the CPS is no longer lower than it is for members of the public when they are investigated for a crime. That is not justified or appropriate, and it is right that that threshold should be brought back in line.

We also want to ensure that issues of training and specialist capabilities are taken into account at a very early stage in investigations, and we will be revising the guidance for investigations to ensure that happens. The Attorney General has asked the Director of Public Prosecutions to review CPS guidance on charging in cases where officers use force in the line of duty, as I said in my statement. There is a series of areas where we are ensuring that the system can work more effectively, but, crucially, this is about raising confidence for the public as well as for police officers.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. I also send my condolences to the family, friends and loved ones of Chris Kaba, particularly this week while the media are using racist gang tropes to justify his killing.

Some 1,900 people have died in police custody since 1990. The police have protections, while our black communities are over-policed and under-supported. Will the Home Secretary give assurances that we and our communities will be kept safe and that the police, who already have the protections they need, will not be given extra protections?

Yvette Cooper: The framework I have set out is about ensuring a proper system of accountability for police forces and police officers—I think that all police officers will support it as immensely important—for how they use their powers. However, we also must tackle the hugely long delays, and the complexity, in the system. The different thresholds and the concerns that specialist capabilities, such as driving and firearms, are not taken into account at an early stage in investigations, end up with serious problems much later, as firearms officers or other police officers feel that they do not have confidence or clarity about their responsibilities or how they can use their powers. Equally, communities must not feel that they are being let down because they do not have timely investigations, and conclusions and answers, to their concerns.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Sergeant Blake has gone through two years of living hell for simply doing his duty and keeping the British public safe. Will the Home Secretary join us at Reform UK in commending his bravery to send out a clear message to all our brave police officers that this place has their backs?

Yvette Cooper: Police officers, who do immensely difficult work across the country every day to keep us safe, deserve our strong support. They often show huge bravery in the most difficult circumstances. I have attended the police bravery awards every year for 14 years to recognise and support the work that police officers do, often in the most difficult of circumstances. I think those officers all believe it is important that we have a system in which communities can feel confident in the work that police officers do, and that they as officers can continue to do that work to keep us safe every single day.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I pay tribute to the majority of police officers, who go to work and do a decent job. Often, police officers themselves are as disgusted as the general public when misconduct takes place in police forces. Does my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary agree that there is a connection between the delays in police investigations, the delays in the criminal justice system and the delays in misconduct hearings, and that these things have to be taken in the round? In my community, we had the case of Dalian Atkinson, who was killed by a police officer who is now serving time in prison after using a Taser. Will the review look at the use of Tasers as part of its work?

Yvette Cooper: We want the College of Policing to be able to set up a lessons learned database to make sure that action is taken when, for example, there are deaths or serious injuries following police contact. Even when such cases are investigated and reforms, measures or recommendations are made, too often those are not followed up and are not actually implemented. As a result, bereaved families can feel badly let down. It is important not only that we have a clear framework of

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standards, but that when things go wrong, a proper system is in place to ensure that lessons are learned and things can be improved for the future.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am sure most fair-minded people will feel that the Home Secretary has got the balance exactly right, particularly as she has now brought in the presumption of anonymity. May I draw her attention to a surprisingly detailed report by the courts correspondent of the *Evening Standard*? He seems to have had access to police intelligence reports about a £10,000 reward being offered by gangs to identify, and presumably wreak reprisals against, the sergeant concerned. What is concerning to me is that a Metropolitan police spokesman says:

“This was investigated and protective measures taken. The investigation is now closed.”

I would have thought that, if there were intelligence indicating that a hit was being arranged, the investigation should not be closed until the perpetrators were themselves arrested.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the right hon. Member for that question. It is clearly important that police officers who face threats or risks as a result of the job they do and the difficult situations they find themselves in because of their work to keep us safe have strong protection and support. He will know that I cannot comment on an individual case and certainly not on an individual investigation. Those are rightly independent operational decisions for police forces. However, I think more widely that everyone will want to make sure that officers who do difficult jobs do have the support that they need.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): The balance between ensuring that our police have the powers and tools they need to keep our streets safe and ensuring that they are not above the law is a delicate one. In that light, I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement, and indeed the response of the shadow Home Secretary. Does the Home Secretary agree, however, that some of the comments in the media yesterday—and, indeed, from Members of the House such as the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick)—are unhelpful? We need to consider all the evidence carefully, in a constructive and calm way, when considering this really important issue, and should not rush to conclusions on the back of media reports.

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is an important British tradition that we respect the rule of law, which means that individual decisions are made by the police, prosecutors, the courts and juries independently of anything that the Government do and independently of anything that politicians do or say. We all operate within legal frameworks, as you reminded us at the beginning of the statement, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure all of us would want to respect that, but also to support all of those independent institutions in the complex and challenging work that they do. We can set the framework, but they have to take the individual decisions.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): When I first started my work supporting young people in London to get out of crime and gangs, 75% of violent crime in London

was committed by people aged under 30 and people in that age group were four times more likely to be victims of crime themselves. For the police to get on top of this, there must be restored confidence between young people and the police, which has been so eroded in recent years, but we must also invest in community policing, which was cut so much by the last Government. What will the Home Secretary do to rectify those things and to give young people the trust in the police that they need and deserve?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an important point, because often when we talk about trust and confidence for communities, young people, who are frequently those who have the most contact with the police, feel left out of those discussions. It is important that they, too, have confidence in the police to keep them safe. Restoring neighbourhood policing and having back in our communities police officers who know the local area, and whom young people can get to know, is one of the most important and powerful ways to rebuild trust and make sure that everybody has confidence. That is also how we prevent crime and damage in communities.

Mike Tapp (Dover and Deal) (Lab): It is important that such officers remain anonymous until conviction, and I fully back this statement. As the Home Secretary will know, it is not just the officers facing trial who have to go through intimidation and threats, but their families. Justice is essential, as is protecting our brave officers. Will the Home Secretary join me in acknowledging the huge toll that these policing roles can take not just on officers, but on their families?

Yvette Cooper: I agree. Families often face some of the most challenging burdens and pressures, and we hear from police officers that their concern about the impact on their families often affects them strongly. That is why the presumption of anonymity to the point of conviction is really important to support families, as well as officers.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): First, I put on the record my support and gratitude to all our frontline police officers in the firearms departments for the difficult, challenging and high-pressure work that they do, including Sergeant Blake and his family. There is much to commend in your statement, Home Secretary, so I welcome it, particularly the anonymity for officers facing investigation and the timeline for the review, which is really important.

Two critical words came up in your statement: “confidence” and “accountability”. There is a lot of concern that confidence in the Independent Office for Police Conduct and in the Crown Prosecution Service is falling. In fact, among police officers, particularly those in the firearms departments, confidence is frankly collapsing, and that is not a good place to be. Even the jury in the Chris Kaba case wrote a letter to the judge—they wanted it to be read out, but he decided not to—in which they expressed astonishment and a lack of confidence in the IOPC and the CPS. The point about accountability relates not just to police officers, but to the IOPC and the CPS. Does the Home Secretary still have confidence in the leadership of the IOPC and the CPS, or should that be changed?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the Home Secretary responds, I remind Members that when they use the word “you”, they are speaking to the Chair. Please be short and sharp, Home Secretary, so that we can get everybody in.

Yvette Cooper: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The accountability review found that the accountability system does not currently have confidence among communities or policing. That is why we are setting out very practical reforms. It is important that the work of the IOPC and the CPS is done independently of politicians, police officers and communities. They have to take decisions within the law and within the framework that Parliament sets. That is why this review and this announcement are about how we amend that framework so that they can do their jobs.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Last Saturday in my constituency of Portsmouth North and Paulsgrove, I held a joint coffee morning with the local police to give residents an opportunity to raise concerns directly with officers and to encourage people to sign up to the Let’s Talk platform, which allows Portsmouth police to share information and concerns directly with the public. Does the Home Secretary agree that one way to rebuild public confidence in policing is to restore visible local patrols and rebuild the community policing that has been eroded over many years?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend. Neighbourhood policing has to be at the heart of restoring or rebuilding the confidence of communities in policing.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I welcome much of what the Home Secretary has said. The police officers we are talking about, including Martyn Blake, are often deployed to protect local communities from violent criminal gang members, as he was doing. Does the Home Secretary agree that for a local MP to describe one such violent gang member as a “well-loved” member of the community, and for the Runnymede Trust to describe as unaccountable a police officer who was subject to a full court hearing and process undermines, rather than builds, community confidence?

Yvette Cooper: It is really important that we have the full confidence of communities in the police and the confidence of police to be able to do their jobs. Decisions on individual cases are rightly for independent organisations, whether that be the courts or the misconduct process, but those have to operate within a framework and it is our responsibility to make sure that the framework is right. It is currently not right and that is why we have set out the reforms within which those organisations need to take decisions.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her timely and important announcement. My former colleagues in the police service up and down our country run towards danger on the public’s behalf, pursue dangerous criminals on the public’s behalf and—very rarely, as we have heard today—have to use lethal force on the public’s behalf. Does the Home Secretary agree that if our police officers do not have the confidence to do those things, the law-abiding public will ultimately suffer?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. We must maintain everyone’s confidence—the police must have confidence, as must communities. Ultimately, if communities do not have confidence, policing is undermined, but if police officers do not have confidence, our public safety is undermined, because it means that they cannot do their job. That is why we have put confidence at the heart of our mission for safer streets.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): I, too, welcome the Home Secretary’s statement and plan. Firearms officers are highly skilled specialists, and my constituents are concerned that cases like this one will disincentivise our brave police officers from taking the additional responsibility of carrying firearms. Will she comment on what she is hearing about the recruitment and retention of firearms officers, so that we can reassure the public that armed police officers will be available, should we need them?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an important point. As part of the accountability review, concerns were raised around recruitment and retention, especially from people concerned about the impact on their families. That family issue is so important. That is why we have the presumption of anonymity to the point of conviction and some of the wider reforms, which will, I hope, maintain confidence among communities and police officers.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): An armed robbery was reported at our new Thorne banking hub last week; I send my warmest thoughts to the staff who endured that terrible event. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the officers who responded to the situation? Does she also agree that public confidence in policing will grow with more patrols in neighbourhoods in the future?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend that people feel more confident if they know who their local police officers are. That builds a sense of confidence, which also helps to prevent crime.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for her statement and for the confidence that she is clearly putting in her police officers. We all admire their courage and bravery in what they do. Policing is devolved in Northern Ireland, as she knows, but the ramifications of this decision could be far-reaching. Last week, I had the opportunity to speak to the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and this issue was part of our conversation.

Every police officer in Northern Ireland carries a weapon because of the high threat levels from terrorism. Their lives are on the line every day they are on the beat—that is the life of a police officer in Northern Ireland—so it is very important that we recognise the threats. Will the Home Secretary have discussions with the Chief Constable and the Policing and Finance Ministers in Northern Ireland about how we can move forward on these issues to protect our police officers? That is critical.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the hon. Member for the question. Interestingly, some of the accountability issues are very similar or the same for England and Wales and

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for Northern Ireland, but there are differences in some areas. We have looked at those and I hope that they will be looked at further as part of the ongoing work and reviews that I have raised. However, this is all fundamentally about how we make sure that we raise standards and raise confidence across the board, including for officers and communities.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary agree that the overwhelming majority of police officers are a credit to our communities and our country? In my constituency of Rugby, I have always found that the commitment of senior and rank-and-file officers to protecting the public and taking on criminals is matched by their understanding that they must be held to the highest standards. Does she agree that our responsibility as politicians in this House and in our constituencies is to help all involved in achieving both those important and interlinked objectives?

Yvette Cooper: I agree. Police officers across the country do a totally amazing job. It is often a difficult job: they keep us safe, and they have to face difficult situations that none of us would want to be in. They also believe in high standards, which is why so many police officers and police chiefs want to ensure that the system is more effective at rooting out those who badly fail those standards and who should not be serving in the police.

Police officers want to maintain high standards, but they also want to know that where officers are doing their duty to keep us safe and operating in line with their training and the law, they have our strong support.

We must ensure that confidence works both ways: that we have confidence in policing and that the police have the confidence to do their difficult job of keeping us safe.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. Member was not here for the absolute beginning, but she made it just in time for the opening statements, so I will call her.

Nesil Caliskan: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. Building trust and confidence in the police requires time and honest reflection about the challenges, alongside meaningful steps to improve things. Often, when there are high-profile incidents, there is a knee-jerk reaction and a national debate is sparked. Does the Home Secretary agree that we must avoid knee-jerk reactions, that there needs to be a long-term commitment to building trust and confidence, and that trust and confidence are built through effective policing not just for serious violent crime, but for so-called low-level crimes such as antisocial behaviour and theft?

Yvette Cooper: I agree that some of the issues around confidence are actually about the responsiveness of police and about having neighbourhood policing and a local response. My hon. Friend is right. We need to respond to major reviews such as the Casey review and the Angiolini review, which found failings around standards, systems and vetting, for example. We must ensure that everything we do responds to those broader reviews, as well as recognising difficult individual incidents, to boost confidence.

Point of Order

2.32 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My constituency of Richmond Park, being both particularly attractive and within easy reach of Westminster, is a popular spot for visits by right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House. In fact, it is so popular with the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) that he has visited twice in the past week. I seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker: as the Conservative party leadership contest reaches its exciting final stages, should those of us who are lucky enough to play host to its hustings in our constituency expect prior notification of candidates' plans to visit?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the hon. Member for notice of her point of order. May I check whether she notified the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) of her intention to raise the matter in the Chamber?

Sarah Olney indicated assent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I see the hon. Member nodding. As Mr Speaker has repeatedly told the House, a Member who intends to visit another Member's constituency other than in a purely private capacity must first make every reasonable effort to inform that Member. That applies whatever the purpose of the visit. I hope that all hon. Members will observe that important courtesy.

BILLS PRESENTED

ROUGH SLEEPING (DECRIMINALISATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran presented a Bill to decriminalise rough sleeping; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July 2025, and to be printed (Bill 111).

NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENTS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran presented a Bill to make provision about the content and use of non-disclosure agreements; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July 2025, and to be printed (Bill 112).

PALESTINE STATEHOOD (RECOGNITION) (No. 3) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Layla Moran, supported by Alex Sobel, Kit Malthouse, Calum Miller, Andy McDonald, Ellie Chowns, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Tom Morrison and Andy Slaughter, presented a Bill to make provision in connection with the recognition of the State of Palestine.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July 2025, and to be printed (Bill 113).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at today's sitting:

(i) notwithstanding Standing Order No. 16, proceedings on the Motion in the name of Nick Thomas-Symonds relating to Payment Scheme may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and the Speaker shall put the Question necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order;

(ii) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Lucy Powell relating to Independent Expert Panel not later than one hour after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings on that Motion may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(iii) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Lucy Powell relating to Voting by Proxy (Serious long-term illness or injury) not later than one hour after the commencement of proceedings on that Motion; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; proceedings on that Motion may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

2.35 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I beg to move,

That the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2024 (SI, 2024, No. 872), dated 22 August 2024, a copy of which was laid before this House on 23 August, be approved.

Let us start by reminding ourselves why we are here today. The infected blood scandal is a mark of shame on the British state. The infected blood inquiry's final report, which was published on 20 May, shed light on the trauma inflicted on thousands of people across the country through no fault of their own. People were given contaminated blood or blood products and contracted HIV, hepatitis C and hepatitis B, and then for years they had their voices ignored. Those who were affected—the people who loved, knew and cared for someone who was infected—similarly had their voices ignored. That did nothing but compound the trauma for all involved.

The infected blood inquiry's second interim report, published in 2023, set out 18 recommendations on compensation, informed by Sir Robert Francis KC's 2022 compensation scheme study. The inquiry was unequivocal that a compensation scheme must be set up immediately.

The regulations before the House are essential for delivering that compensation scheme and getting money to people as quickly as we can. In May, when the now Prime Minister and I responded to Sir Brian Langstaff's inquiry, we were absolutely clear. I said:

“One of the most powerful conclusions in this report is that an apology is meaningful only if it is accompanied by action”.—[*Official Report*, 21 May 2024; Vol. 750, c. 748.]

Today, with the regulations and the compensation scheme, we are delivering that action and taking another step on the road to the justice that has been so cruelly delayed.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): My constituent Alex Robinson lost her father to this scandal in 2006, having been his carer since the age of 13. In her words:

“He never got to walk me down the aisle or hold his grandchildren.”

She is incredibly concerned about getting justice. Can the Minister confirm that my constituent, along with all the families, will receive legal support to ensure that they can make their application to the compensation scheme successfully?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am sure the whole House will join me in expressing our sympathies with the situation that my hon. Friend's constituent and her family have been through. The Infected Blood Compensation Authority will aim to ensure that appropriate advice and support is available to assist people in managing their compensation awards, in accessing financial services and, where relevant, in accessing benefits advice. Sir Robert Francis KC recommended in his report that legal support be available to people who want to claim compensation; the Government and I have accepted that recommendation. We will work with the Infected Blood Compensation Authority to develop the package of support services.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): One of the report's recommendations is that charities and support organisations that provide advice to victims and their families be placed on a statutory

funding basis. Can the Minister confirm that the Government's intention is to implement that recommendation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: If I understand the hon. Gentleman's intervention correctly, he is talking about the different organisations that already exist. We will consider all the recommendations in the round, but he is absolutely right to highlight the hugely important role of those organisations. The Infected Blood Compensation Authority will look to work with the different support organisations. That is vital.

The scheme is based on the recommendations and principles put forward by the inquiry. In line with those, and supported by advice from the inquiry response expert group, it was updated following the engagement exercise that Sir Robert Francis KC undertook in June with victims and representatives of the infected blood community. The Government have sought to design a fair and comprehensive compensation scheme, which will also be quick and simple for eligible applicants to access.

I turn first to eligibility. The scheme and the regulations define people who are eligible as infected people, in line with recommendation 2 of the inquiry's second interim report. That covers people infected with HIV, hepatitis C and hepatitis B, and it includes people directly infected by treatment with blood as well as people indirectly infected via transmission from a directly infected person.

Secondly, the regulations establish a core route for claiming compensation as an infected person. The core route provides for compensation to be awarded under five categories or heads of loss, as set out in recommendation 6 of the inquiry's report: an injury impact award, a social impact award, a care award, a financial loss award and an autonomy award. Together, they will comprise the total compensation award to infected individuals, or to the estate of any deceased infected individuals, to recognise the wide-ranging harm resulting from their infection.

Earlier this year, the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 established the Infected Blood Compensation Authority in law to deliver the scheme. I am proud to have campaigned with many Members across the House to have delivered that change in legislation; I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) for his role. I am proud that this Government are now delivering on that commitment.

The regulations before the House will provide the Infected Blood Compensation Authority with the legal powers that it needs to begin making payments. They also provide further detail on how it will accept applications and pay awards. The authority, under the chairmanship of Sir Robert Francis, has been working hard to design and implement effective, simple and secure processes that put the infected blood community at the heart of its work.

Last week, the Infected Blood Compensation Authority reached out to the very first claimants under the scheme. The authority is taking a test-and-learn approach that will ensure that it can take feedback on board and improve the service before it opens its full compensation service. I hope that that step provides confidence that we are absolutely committed to driving forward progress to meet our shared intention of beginning payments by the end of this year, as I have previously said to the

House. I will do everything in my power to ensure that all those who are entitled to compensation receive it as soon as possible.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I commend him for the way in which he is handling this very sensitive matter; he has got the tone just right. On behalf of a constituent, Mr A, who was infected by being born of a mother who was infected, I have corresponded with Sir Robert Francis KC. If my constituent were here, he would be keen to know that the compensation scheme will cover people in his circumstances, both for their physical and mental distress. For the avoidance of doubt, could the Minister please confirm that those people will be covered by the scheme as well?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes. First of all, and I am sure I speak for everyone in the House, I express my sympathies to the right hon. Gentleman's constituent and his family. The right hon. Gentleman is entirely right to raise the case directly with Sir Robert Francis. I urge Members across the House to look up the details of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority on the gov.uk website and point their constituents in that direction—the authority is already setting out newsletters—and to do as the right hon. Gentleman has done and write directly to the authority. On the basis of being infected through transmission from his mother, his constituent clearly fits the category of an infected person under the scheme. He is precisely the kind of person the scheme is designed to help. The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the case on the Floor of the House today in this debate.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. This has been a long, long journey for the people who have been affected by this scandal—and that is exactly what it has been. Can he clarify an issue that has been raised about inheritance tax? Given that many payments will be paid to the very elderly, many second generation recipients are worried about inheritance tax. Will they be exempt from inheritance tax? Is that possible?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, the awards are exempt from inheritance tax and capital gains tax. That is precisely how the scheme has been designed. I hope that gives reassurance to the hon. Gentleman.

Let me move on to the points raised by the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, as it is important that I address them. As the Committee noted, the infected blood scandal stretches back over many decades, and access to records, in particular medical evidence, will be very challenging—I acknowledge that. That is at the very heart, as I am sure hon. and right hon. Members will understand, of the challenge of trying to address an injustice that has been allowed to continue for so many decades. Where that is the case, the authority will need to make objective decisions relying on the evidence that is available in order to determine, on the balance of probabilities, that treatment with infected blood occurred. The authority will—I expect it to do this—provide assistance to those who believe that their medical records have been lost or destroyed, and evidencing eligibility

will be easier, faster and more compassionate than, for example, one would experience through any court proceedings.

The Committee highlighted the complexity of the regulations. That is why, alongside the publication of the regulations and the explanatory memorandum, the Government published a detailed policy paper in August on how the compensation scheme will operate, setting out what individuals can expect to receive, including case study examples. Additionally, the Infected Blood Compensation Authority will ensure that appropriate advice and support is available to assist people with managing their compensation awards, accessing financial services and accessing benefits advice where relevant, as I set out in response to an earlier intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash).

Thirdly, the Committee raised questions on how claimants will receive payments. As set out in recommendation 10 of the infected blood inquiry's second interim report, the regulations include a mechanism for electing for periodic compensation payments or a lump sum. That is responding to the wishes of those who have told us that they wanted that option to be available to them. We have also provided an alternative for those currently receiving support scheme payments through the infected blood support schemes. The so-called IBSS route was developed following the recommendations of Sir Robert Francis KC, following his engagement with representatives of the infected blood community.

The clearest finding from that engagement was around the continuation of the existing support scheme payments. The Government have listened, and we have agreed and accepted that support scheme payments will continue for life for those who elect the IBSS route. The route will be available for those who applied to be registered on a support scheme on or before 31 March 2025, and delivered as part of the compensation package. The tariff-based scheme is designed to be fast, fair, consistent and secure. We hope that people will be satisfied that they have been provided with full and fair compensation, as the scheme sets out. However, should that not be the case, the regulations make provision for review of decisions made by the authority and for appeals to the first-tier tribunal.

Mike Amesbury (Runcorn and Helsby) (Lab): Michael in my constituency will benefit from the compensation, and I commend the Minister and the Government for their swift action. How do we ensure that we maintain trust in the process? Is there an opportunity for victims to review any aspects of the compensation scheme that may not be working?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about trust in the process. The scheme is designed to have a core route, and a supplemental route for particular issues around care claims or financial loss that are not appropriately captured in the core route. There is also provision around review and appeals to the first-tier tribunal, which is important. One of the purposes of having a tariff-based scheme is to try to make it simpler and easier to access, so that the need for subsequent appeals is minimised.

I know that the House speaks as one when it comes to paying long overdue compensation to those impacted by this harrowing scandal. Following the passing of the

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Victims and Prisoners Act, these regulations are the next substantial step towards getting money to people who rightly deserve it. However, although there has been progress, the work is far from finished. A second set of regulations will provide for other elements of the compensation scheme, including compensation payments to those who are affected and for claims outside the core route. Subject to parliamentary approval, the Government aim for the second set of regulations to be in place by 31 March 2025, to support our intention—as I have previously told this House—for those affected to start receiving payments next year.

There is shared determination across the House to deliver compensation as swiftly as possible and with the minimum delay. I hope that today, hon. Members across the House can agree that these regulations are a significant step towards that.

2.52 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I thank the Paymaster General for advance notice of the statutory instrument being laid, as he has always given. He rightly reminded the House of the injustice that victims of the infected blood scandal have been subject to—one that has spanned several decades. I hope that we are now in rapid delivery mode. My role is to ensure that the Government are doing all they can to deliver compensation as swiftly and effectively as possible for the infected and affected, following the passage of the Bill under the previous Government.

As the right hon. Gentleman knows, it is also my duty to work collaboratively with the Government on this matter, supporting them and scrutinising them where appropriate. To that end, I wish to set out some issues raised with me by representatives of the infected and affected communities. First, I draw the right hon. Gentleman's attention to the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee's second report of the Session, which found the explanatory memorandum to be "overly complex and technical, while lacking basic information about the policy".

To some extent, I very much sympathise. This is a very complicated matter. I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman will agree that this critical information should be easily accessible to all. Can he assure the House that he will do everything he can to ensure that the explanatory memorandum to the second set of regulations will be much clearer in language and in outlining how the policy will work practically? He rightly referred to the detailed policy paper that he published in August, with the case studies and the reference to advice and support, but the implication of what has been said is that an improvement can be made.

On the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, I echo my previous comments in welcoming the Government's pledge to deliver the first payments by the end of the year. I know that the Paymaster General and I align in recognising the paramount importance of delivering this compensation as quickly as possible. However, currently, there is no defined timetable for when applications can be made and when payments will be processed.

Furthermore, I know the Paymaster General will find it as troubling as I do that groups of victims have previously described meeting the end-of-year deadline

as "nigh on impossible". We need to solve these trust issues. Can he outline the steps the Government and the IBCA are taking to ensure that payments will be made by the end of the year—just 10 weeks away? Can he confirm what proportion of the eligible infected community will receive their payments by the end of the year?

There is a suspicion, of which I am sure the Paymaster General is aware, that achieving payouts for the previously mentioned user group of 20 individuals by the end of the year will be used to technically satisfy the obligation he undertook to get money out of the door by the end of the year. The infected community as a whole will want to know that all of them—beyond the 20—will receive their payments in their bank accounts, and what will be the interval between the end of the year and that happening. Please could the Paymaster General explain how the user group of 20 people have found the new scheme, and how quickly their lessons can be applied to the rest of the infected community? I understand that the IBCA recently confirmed its intention to invite increasingly larger groups of people to test the service before it opens to those who are eligible. Can the Paymaster General confirm when the scheme will open to larger groups? How many will be involved? Will they include all victims, including those affected from the infected estates?

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned issues around the burden of proof. I seek clarification on the proof that victims need to provide. It appears that the burden of proof once again falls to victims, which risks going against the letter and spirit of both Sir Brian Langstaff and Sir Robert Francis's recommendations. I recognise and am sympathetic to the challenges, given Cabinet Office officials' advice to me when I was in his position. Locating medical records could be an issue, given that the latest case date specified in the regulations is more than 30 years ago. Can the Paymaster General outline the decision-making process of the IBCA in circumstances where medical records are apparently unavailable? What steps is he taking to ensure that rightful compensation is received when proof of infected conditions is not readily available?

I would like to move on to affected persons. In his report in May, Sir Brian Langstaff made it abundantly clear that both infected and affected persons were to be given interim payments as quickly as possible. I am therefore concerned that part 3 of this instrument defines eligible infected persons but not the affected persons. Can the Minister offer some reassurance to the affected community and confirm that he has not ignored Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendation for the affected community? The affected community are concerned that the Government's delays in laying the second set of regulations for them means that many elderly parents of infected victims or bereaved partners will not live to see their rightful payouts as affected individuals.

I acknowledge the drafting and timetable challenges, but it will be 10 months from the final report this May to the end of next March without any defined regulations or timetable for making a claim as an affected person. That will distress many in the affected community. I am absolutely sure that the Paymaster General does not think it is fair for those affected people to feel like second-class citizens, but will he explain what processes will be under way between now and the end of March,

and will he look to publish, even in broad outline, a timetable for affected communities' applications and the interval before payments will be received?

I am also concerned that no impact assessment has been published for this statutory instrument. Parliamentary scrutiny from all sides needs to be balanced, and fairer legislation will ensue if we can have maximum information on impact in advance, so that the evaluation process can be better informed. I know the Paymaster General has previously said that the costs of the infected blood scheme will be recognised in next week's Budget. Can he confirm whether the Government have calculated the impact and cost of the regulations?

I shall conclude by thanking the Paymaster General for his work in this area and his transparency with me. This legislation is very technically challenging and difficult to get right. I have enormous sympathy and respect for him. However, I urge him to ensure that critical information is as readily accessible as possible to all victims, infected and affected alike, bringing as much specificity as possible to the timelines for those different communities to this House as quickly as possible, and outlining the cost of the scheme.

For many of these victims, time is of the essence, which is why we must do all we can to deliver justice as quickly and effectively as possible. I remain committed to supporting the Government where I possible can and asking questions that are as reasonable as possible where answers still need to be provided.

3.1 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am really pleased to see these regulations return to the House. Although there is still much to do, it marks a significant milestone in ensuring that the Government deliver on their promise to work at pace to establish the IBCA and give it the necessary powers to start making compensation payments. As hon. Members have said, we need to do this to ensure that payments are made as quickly as possible to people who have waited far too long for justice already. I thank the Paymaster General for the sense of urgency that has characterised his work to progress this issue to date since returning to Government. I know that in that work he will have been mindful of the many stories of injustice from this long-running scandal.

My right hon. Friend the Paymaster General, as my constituency neighbour, will know that my constituents, the Smiths, lost their son Colin to AIDS at just seven years old. Colin contracted it from infected blood from Arkansas prison, aged just 10 months. It emerged during the inquiry that Colin's doctor knew about the infection risks associated with using imported blood treatments on children, but broke his own NHS department's guidelines to do so anyway. Not only did the Smiths lose their very beloved son, but because of the stigma surrounding HIV at the time, the family were ostracised by the local community, harassed and abused, lost employment, and even had "AIDS dead" written in black paint alongside their house. That is why we are here today. There are so many stories. They illustrate why this is so important.

When the final report of the infected blood inquiry was published, I said to the now former Minister that the Smiths wanted Colin to be remembered, and for

"sorry" to turn into concrete action on compensation, without adding further to the decades of painful delay that so many victims have had to endure.

Progress is clearly being made. My right hon. Friend the Paymaster General also knows that there are many questions that come up along the way. A lot of people are getting their information online. I agree that we need more information for affected families such as the Smiths. On their behalf, I reiterate that there is still much confusion among the affected community about what the regulations will mean for individual people making compensation claims. There is a bit of a feeling that compensation for bereaved parents is low. It would be really helpful if more could be done to explain how compensation will be calculated.

It is also important that the Government engage on an ongoing basis with all the many charities who have been involved, as the IBCA has done. We should recognise—a point made by the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan)—the massively important work that those charities have done to help the infected and affected. The charities do a fantastic job, but it is important to know from today exactly how families will be individually supported, and whether they might be offered caseworkers to get them through the process. Perhaps my right hon. Friend will say something about that.

My right hon. Friend also knows that many of those affected, like the Smiths, have waited years for compensation. It is not just about the compensation; it is also about justice, but both matter. My right hon. Friend has announced previously that applications for interim payments to the estates of deceased infected people will open this month. Can he confirm when that will be? Could he also set out whether affected parents who are not the beneficiaries of an estate will be eligible for those interim payments?

The Smiths also understand that those applications should be processed, and payments made, within 30 days. If my right hon. Friend would address that in his closing remarks, it would be great.

The scheme, the system and the framework are clearly very complicated, as hon. Members have said. We should acknowledge that today and do as much as possible to help people through that process.

My right hon. Friend talked about the second set of regulations to enable compensation payments to begin for those affected. Could he say more about the progress of the work being undertaken to that end, when he expects those regulations to be laid, and when he estimates applications will open? I think the date of 31 March was mentioned.

It is vital that once the IBCA begins its work, applications are swiftly processed without unnecessary delay. Will my right hon. Friend talk about the resources available to support that?

My right hon. Friend is obviously aware of the vital work of small charities and support groups to support those affected, like the Smiths. I echo the point raised by the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East that those groups' resources have been hugely stretched. It would be really helpful to know what funding might be available to enable such groups to continue their important work.

[Jessica Morden]

I thank the Minister for his important work so far. I hope that we have future opportunities to keep raising these issues as the process continues, on behalf of those who have waited so very long for this. We need to get it right, but we also need to get it done.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): There are many valuable contributions still to be made during the course of this debate. I just want to remind Members to be mindful, during the debate on the infected blood compensation scheme, that the contaminated blood products group litigation is still before the courts. The resolution relating to matters that are sub judice does not apply when the House is discussing legislation, as we are doing today, but I would none the less invite Members to exercise caution and avoid any unnecessary comments on active legal proceedings.

I now invite the Liberal Democrat spokesperson to speak.

3.7 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats are glad to see the introduction of this legislation and the establishment of the infected blood compensation scheme. We are glad that it will move the victims of this atrocity, both those infected and affected, closer to long-overdue justice and compensation. Victims and their families have been waiting decades for answers and for recognition of the suffering that they have endured. Liberal Democrats welcome the findings of Sir Brian Langstaff's report, which vindicated so many of those people affected. We voted last December for the amendment to the Victims and Prisoners Bill, requiring the Government to set up the compensation scheme, and we are glad that this motion establishes that.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): This is a deeply sad scandal. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need reassurance from the Minister that there is adequate capacity to process the applications at pace?

Sarah Olney: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. It goes very much to the heart of the remarks that I shall make about ensuring that the compensation scheme established through this legislation is indeed adequate, not just in its resources but in its powers to fully address the magnitude of the justice and compensation that is owed to the families who have suffered.

Although we are grateful that the Government have brought this legislation before Parliament at such an early stage, we want to ensure that these proposals go far enough, and ensure that all those affected get the justice they deserve. The Liberal Democrats will work with the Government to ensure that the provision for fair and proper compensation is implemented as quickly and effectively as possible.

More than 3,000 deaths are attributable to infected blood and blood products, over 30,000 people were infected with hepatitis C or HIV after receiving infected blood transfusions, and many thousands more have been affected by the suffering that has been caused. This scandal is a chilling story of people being failed,

not only by the medical professionals who treated them but by the NHS—which should have been responsible for the safety of their treatment—and by a series of Governments whose integrity and diligence should have precluded such an atrocity from ever taking place.

Over the decades when this was happening, children were subject to unsafe and deeply unethical clinical testing. Senior doctors in British hospitals administered experimental treatments while knowing the significant risk of contaminated products, and staff in haemophilia centres across the country used blood products even though it was widely known that these products were likely to be infected, as was so vividly highlighted by the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden).

The scope of the negligence goes far beyond the medical administration; the infected blood inquiry report reveals a culture of covering up. We must ensure that there is transparency in governance, especially given the disregard with which the last Conservative Government treated the public's trust. The Liberal Democrats support the survivors' call for a duty of candour on all public officials, as well as the introduction of increased legal protections for whistleblowers. We must do all we can to ensure that we have an honest political culture in which concerns are listened to and questions answered, so that nothing of this nature can ever happen again. We are glad that the report has made public the extent to which people were failed, and that there is support across the House for acknowledgement of the injustices that have been suffered, which this legislation begins to rectify.

However, while we are grateful for the Government's action in response to Sir Brian's inquiry, particularly the Minister's extension of the scheme beyond the initial commitments from the previous Government, we are concerned that the legislation does not go far enough. Financial compensation cannot make up for the years of injustice and the unimaginable distress that so many thousands of people have gone through.

The compensation scheme is an important step in acknowledging their suffering, but I urge the Minister to see it as the first step in the process of compensating victims. We want to see legislation that compensates the children who, without consent, were tested on with contaminated blood but did not go on to develop a disease. We want to see recognition of the family members who saw loved ones suffer, and in some instances pass away, but who will receive no compensation because they were over the age of 18 at the time of infection. We want to see a clear and explicit explanation of the payment bandings that have been set out, and we want to see engagement with the affected community at all stages.

It is vital that the scheme acknowledges the trauma experienced beyond the physical suffering caused by the infected blood. Not only were so many lives cut short or destroyed by the hideous physical illnesses that contaminated blood caused, but unimaginable psychological distress has been caused by experimentation on unconsenting and often unaware patients. We urge the Government to ensure that this scheme encompasses all those who suffered owing to the infected blood scandal, and that any further legislation is developed with the close engagement of those who best understand that suffering.

Our principal concerns lie with the transparency of the calculation of compensation payments. It is crucial that the scheme does not establish a hierarchy of suffering,

and I ask the Minister to outline the process by which these tariffs were decided. The compensation for people treated with infected blood products who “self-cleared” hepatitis C is very low, and does not account for the health impacts that they have experienced or the psychological damage that they have experienced. There is also a significant discrepancy between those infected with hepatitis C and those infected with HIV. Although we welcome the initiation of compensation payments, we believe that there must be greater transparency over how they have been calculated. We urge the Minister to engage with the affected communities, and to ensure that there is clear communication explaining how these decisions have been reached.

The complications caused by the decades of defensive cover-up have not only exacerbated the trauma experienced by victims, but affected the estates of those who have died. In the intervening decades, some estates have become contentious and the question of the rightful recipients of compensation has therefore become unclear. In some cases, the compensation could be entailed away from those on whom a person’s infection or death has had the greatest impact. It is vital for the IBCA to have the necessary resources and powers to support victims through the process, to ensure that appropriate compensation is received by all those affected.

The burden of the administrative concerns and queries from affected families is currently falling on overstretched charities. Has the Minister considered the creation of a dedicated unit to deal with inquiries, working alongside the IBCA? We must support the work of these vital organisations—the charities providing support—and engage with them to understand exactly the needs of those affected. The motion sets out the possibility of future legislation, and we hope that the Government will follow up this legislation with vital community engagement. We urge them to ensure, as the scheme progresses, that there are mechanisms in place to enable the concerns of charities, organisations and affected individuals to be heard.

We are also cautious about the structural limitations of the IBCA. Given the many years over which the scandal took place, the six-year timeframe of the authority as a legal entity does not seem appropriate. The equivalent scheme set up by the Irish Government in the 1990s is still active, and it is crucial that the IBCA exists for long enough to ensure that the full compensation scheme and associated processes can be carried out effectively.

The Liberal Democrats are glad to see the introduction of this legislation. We welcome the Government’s swift creation of a compensation body, the IBCA, to implement the report’s recommendations and begin payments to the victims of this scandal. It is essential that people begin to receive the compensation that is so long overdue, and it is vital that that is done in the most compassionate and effective way. While we hope that the Government will go further in ensuring that the affected community are fully engaged and consulted in this process, the infected blood compensation scheme will allow victims, both infected and affected, to move, at last, towards justice.

Let me finally take this opportunity to thank Emily, Eleni, Pipsy, Claudia, Harry and Orlando, who are A-level students in my constituency and have been gaining work experience in my office this week. It has been a pleasure to host them, and they have worked very hard in helping me to put my speech together.

3.16 pm

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I have spoken in the House on numerous occasions about this desperately sad scandal, and I have frequently mentioned the number of people who are dying while we seem to have inquiry after inquiry, and ask question after question. The stage that we have reached today is long overdue. The motion goes some way towards allaying my concerns, and the concerns of those who are still suffering as a result of one of the biggest scandals in NHS history.

This is a tragic miscarriage of justice that has destroyed the lives of many individuals and families up and down the country. I have the utmost faith in my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General, and I know that he is aware that many people believe that the proposals before us are incomplete and do not go far enough—hence his announcement that, hopefully, the second tranche of compensation proposals will come to the House before 31 March 2025. That is certainly good news. Nevertheless, there are people who are still waiting, and who will be leading a life of uncertainty between now and then, so we must ensure that we step up to the challenge.

This is the first step taken by a Government who have acted within months of taking office, and this legislation is the beginning of justice for those who have suffered for so long. Along with, probably, every other Member present, I have spoken to many campaigners and many infected or affected victims and families, and my good friend and constituent Sean Cavens, who was infected with hepatitis C as a baby, has been a great help to me in this regard. However, we still have many concerns, although I repeat that the progress made in the first 100 days of this Labour Government has been fantastic.

There is still confusion about the impact that the scheme will have on individual claimants. There is also concern that there has been a lack of engagement generally in order to understand and act on potential weaknesses in the scheme; there needs to be far more engagement. I am sure that my hon. Friend, or right hon. Friend, the Paymaster General will take steps to constructively involve the charities and individuals with an interest in this before 31 March next year. That is not just my view; it is the view of individuals and organisations that I have spent hours and hours with, listening to their concerns. The Haemophilia Society and other campaigning bodies have been absolutely fantastic, and very patient in many ways. As the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) mentioned, these organisations really need to be financed from central Government, if that is at all possible. They have used their resources and campaigning finances every which way they can to try to get justice, and now not only are they totally exhausted, but they have exhausted their finances as well.

The core route for compensation has been laid out today, but there are concerns that there is little information on the supplementary routes. My hon. Friend, or right hon. Friend—I keep demoting him; I promise I do not mean to do that—will be acutely aware that many suffering from haemophilia believe that they will need to apply through the supplementary route; I hope that he can give more detail about how that will work in practice.

There are further concerns about the amount of compensation and the compensation period for those impacted by the infection and subsequent death of a

[*Ian Lavery*]

loved one. Also, how were the infected victims who will first get compensation chosen? There are more than 5,000 registered, so if 20 are compensated before the end of the year, that does seem to be a drop in the ocean. Can we have a clear timeline, setting out how many claims the Infected Blood Compensation Authority expects to process per month in 2025? As was mentioned, one victim of this scandal dies every four days.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Gentleman highlights one of two fundamental elements of the issue—and I thank the Government for what they are doing, which builds on the work of the previous Government. The first element is information for the families and the individuals affected. Clearly, the provision of information will affect exactly what the hon. Gentleman describes: whether people come forward, and whether the rate of payment is maintained at its current pace. The second issue is alacrity. Very often with these things, getting money out quickly matters most, because there is a rate of attrition. Without being macabre about this, some of the people affected will die before they get the money, so alacrity is critical in dealing with this kind of challenge.

Ian Lavery: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I have covered a number of the issues that he raises, and will cover more as my contribution continues.

There are other huge issues of major concern; that is being relayed to us by the groups and individuals we have been in constant contact with. For example, they believe that the £10,000 and £15,000 awards for unethical research and testing are far too low. There is no recognition that people with chronic hepatitis C underwent interferon treatment, or of the additional impact that had on their life. There is also concern that hepatitis C payment bandings do not reflect the suffering caused. Bereaved parents and children will receive very low compensation payments if they are not a beneficiary of the estate of their bereaved family member. There is no compensation for the loss, psychological impact and suffering caused by exposure to variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease. The list is endless. I think my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General has received a letter from the Haemophilia Society outlining the vast majority of the issues that it wants to raise.

I want to mention the scandal of children being selected for dangerous medical research. Children were given the factor concentrates, despite knowledge of the dangers posed. This is very eerie. It is not British-like. It has been described to me as organised child abuse. The sums of money suggested—£15,000 or £10,000—for compensating victims seem paltry given the horrors that abuse caused. We should think about what happened only a few years ago at Treloar, a school set up basically for haemophiliacs. We have had institutions up and down this country experimenting on children. That does not sound like the UK, does it? They have been experimenting on children, unknown to those children and their families. I simply cannot get my head around this sinister issue. There needs to be a lot more focus on what happened back in the day when this country, and the great NHS, was experimenting on young kids. It is not just Treloar; it has received a lot of attention, but there were other such institutions up and down the

country. We need to get to the bottom of this, and the country and the Government need to send a clear message that this experimentation is wholly unacceptable. I know that the Government will look into the issue and act on it with the utmost haste. It is absolutely critical that those who have suffered this injustice—this scandal—for so long get the redress that they sorely deserve.

As we discuss this scandal, we should not forget those who have suffered, such as my aforementioned constituent Sean Cavens, who continues to be an inspirational campaigner on the issue, standing up for those who are unable to do so and all those who, tragically, have lost their life. Every Member speaking in the debate will no doubt mention individuals in their constituency who have been campaigning; they have done a fantastic job, and good on them.

The Labour Government have taken giant steps to address the scandal. I would like to thank personally, and on behalf of the people I have spoken to, my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General and his team, and I urge them to consider the many outstanding issues before this matter comes back to the House on 31 March 2025.

3.28 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I am conscious of your warning about the sub judice rules, Madam Deputy Speaker, as there is ongoing litigation on this issue, but I hope and believe that nothing I say in my brief contribution will in any way overshadow the prerogative of the courts.

This has gone on for far, far too many years. I have dealt with two constituents in particular, both of whom came to my constituency surgery to explain to me as their Member of Parliament what they had gone through and how it had affected them—and it clearly had, in both cases. I hope the House will forgive me if I judge that it is not right to go through their cases in detail, but they were both extremely polite and eminently reasonable in what they were asking for, and both were deeply frustrated by how long the process had taken. I will send them both a copy of the Government's regulations and, because they are rather complicated, a copy of the explanatory notes, which I hope they will find to be of as much use as I have. As result of this afternoon's proceedings, I hope not just that they will be able to achieve some financial redress, to which I am certain they are absolutely morally entitled, but that they will be able to achieve some peace of mind, because it is very clear to me that both those people's lives have been materially affected by the issue. One of them said to me, "It's not about the money. I just want to be able to bring this to a close." I hope that the House will understand that sentiment. If hon. Members had heard it in the way I heard it face to face, I am sure they would have been as convinced as I was.

I want to say a few brief thank yous, because, as we all know, this has been a very long and complex journey—not just for those who were affected by the scandal, but for those who have had to deal with the consequences many years later. This was not the national health service's finest hour, and it took a great deal of campaigning by many people to get the system to put its hand up and admit that something had gone wrong—in fact, dreadfully wrong. Had it not been for the persistence of some of those individuals, we would not be having this debate this afternoon.

However, someone had to deal with the consequences. I pay tribute to two brilliant public servants: Sir Brian Langstaff and Sir Robert Francis—there were others—who have both, in their own way, had to attempt to exercise what one might call the judgment of Solomon in dealing with this extremely detailed and complex issue. They have both done their country a service.

I also commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and the former right honourable Member for Horsham, who is no longer a Member of the House. When they were in government, they both attempted to deal with this very complex issue. Having had some private conversations with the former right honourable Member for Horsham, with whom I served on the Defence Committee in the previous Parliament, I know that this matter preyed on his mind and that he really tried to do his best.

My last thank you goes to the current Paymaster General, who is clearly trying to achieve a resolution as speedily as possible and who has dealt with this issue in a very empathetic manner this afternoon. I speak for two constituents, but I am sure that we all have constituents who have been affected by the scandal, and many people across the country will be grateful for the way in which he is evidently attempting to handle it. I wish him godspeed in all his endeavours. This went on for too long and affected too many people but, hopefully, at last, we can collectively begin to put this right and give those people not just redress, but some sort of peace of mind.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I know that a few Members who were not here for the opening speeches have just turned up. If they can make their way to the Chair, I can have a conversation with them about contributing to the debate.

3.33 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I am grateful for all the work that my right hon. Friend the Paymaster General and this Labour Government have done to move quickly, and to deliver on their commitment to provide compensation to both the infected and affected. Today, we have an opportunity to support the first of those payments being made.

As we have heard from other Members, the infected blood inquiry revealed systemic failures that led to 30,000 patients being infected, and more than 3,000 people have died as a result of those infections. One of these was Jane Fitzgerald, the mother of my constituent Ronan Fitzgerald, who is in the Gallery today. I want to put on the official record the horror that Jane, her family and other victims have suffered. In 1978, when Jane was 17 years old, she had an ectopic pregnancy and was diagnosed with anaemia. Her GP advised her to have a small blood transfusion to make her feel better, and Jane was given just one unit of blood at the Royal Victoria hospital in Boscombe. It was not until more than two decades later that she discovered, at the age of 42, that she had been infected with hepatitis C. Jane and her family sought treatment, but by the time she was able to find a suitable option, her cirrhosis was too advanced. Her infection caused untold physical and emotional damage, and subjected her to numerous indignities, including the stigma related to her condition.

Jane was told on at least two occasions that she was clear of the disease, only to find that her condition had actually worsened. Her condition caused fluids to collect in her abdomen, legs and feet, which required regular draining, and she often spent hours waiting for hospital treatment when there were no beds or equipment to treat her. On one occasion, her stomach split open while she was waiting for treatment, but she was sent home because the hospital did not have the drainage equipment. Eventually, the toxins in her liver carried cancerous cells to her lungs and brainstem. Jane died in 2015, at the age of 54.

Jane was taken away from her family in the worst possible way, and they suffer the consequences every day. Ronan has spoken candidly about the irreversible impact that losing his mother has had on him, and being powerless to prevent her untimely death has affected his mental health and caused him debilitating physical illness. Ronan is a British Army veteran and served in the Royal Corps of Signals, but he was left unable to climb a flight of stairs or even leave bed; he was bed-bound for long periods at the age of just 29. In his mother's final moments, Ronan made a vow that he would continue to fight for justice for her, and for all the families affected. Thousands more are living with illness and fear, in full knowledge that, even now, somebody dies every three and a half days.

When I first met Ronan, he asked me whether I would be willing to stand up in the House of Commons to speak up for his mother, and for all the other people who have been infected and affected. He has been a stalwart campaigner for the affected children and has strived to ensure that their voices, and the impact of this scandal on their lives, are accounted for. He now co-chairs the support group Tainted Blood-Affected Siblings and Children, representing 400 members. Although he is grateful for the progress that has been made, he has asked me to share his concerns and to be his voice.

The community of affected children have called for the removal of the discriminatory age restrictions that are placed on siblings over the age of 18 who did not live at the same address as their infected loved ones at the point of infection; for affected children and siblings to not be excluded from any heads of loss; and for all infected and affected persons to have equal access to supplementary routes across all heads of loss, whereby they may provide further evidence of their individual circumstances to ensure that compensation reflects the severe impact of this travesty on their lives. Further, payment to estates should be given the same priority as payments to living infected persons. Any process that delays these payments creates the high probability that some elderly affected members might die before the payments are made, given the time taken to process them. Currently, the Government have no safeguards or protections in place should that happen, whereas protections are offered to those living with infections who die before their payments are made. Families have been waiting too long for justice, and they now run the risk of missing out on this justice and the compensation they deserve. The infected blood inquiry report confirmed that Jane was a victim of medical malpractice through the single unit of non-lifesaving blood she was given, and this was covered up for decades.

[Jessica Toale]

Today is an important day on the long road to justice traversed by families affected by the infected blood scandal, and I pay tribute to the victims and all the campaigners who have fought so hard. I am grateful that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority has agreed to meet the affected children and siblings. In the spirit of test and learn, may I urge the Government to ensure that all efforts are made to deliver justice to the community and to take their voices into account at all stages of the process?

3.39 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): My very first contribution in this place was to raise the issue of the infected blood scandal and its impact on siblings. I raised it in a question, as it had been raised with me directly while canvassing during the general election campaign, and I am glad that we have the opportunity now to raise those issues again in this debate. We on the Liberal Democrat Benches absolutely welcome the opportunity to recognise the victims of this historic failure. The tragedy of history is that we cannot change it, but at least the House now has the opportunity to give victims and their families the recognition and recourse that they have been stripped of for far too long, by learning lessons from this terrible episode and ensuring that history is not repeated.

The administration of high-risk blood transfusions to vulnerable children and adults, carried out by the very medical professionals their families trusted, stands out as one of the most shocking miscarriages of justice in healthcare in our lifetimes. The infected blood scandal has left behind a wake of mourning families forever changed by the loss of their loved ones. Today I share the concerns of just one of those thousands of families. A constituent of mine who lost a sibling to the scandal wrote to me recently to say that he is deeply worried that his 87-year-old mother may not live to witness justice being served through the Government's compensation scheme. I echo the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) in strongly urging the Government to go further in the scheme to include the families and siblings of victims who are currently excluded from support because they were over the age of 18 or did not act as carers for the victims. That is a clear exclusion that we need to revisit, and I hope it can be included in further phases of the scheme.

No amount of money can ever make up for the grief, but it is our responsibility in this Chamber to ensure that the British state recognises and begins to tackle historical injustices such as this one with a comprehensive scheme. To ensure that the scheme does that properly, the Government must also ensure full transparency over its progress and open ongoing communications with all those affected. Further administrative delays will undermine this vital work, and that cannot be allowed to happen. I am reassured to hear about the work being done to expedite the claims and to hear the dates for the opening and the first phase of the scheme.

The scheme is not just a financial obligation but a moral imperative. We owe it to the victims and their families to act decisively and transparently. Justice cannot be delayed. When the story of this scandal is told, let today be the first page of the final chapter in which we

right a historic wrong, take stock of what it has taught us about the failures of our system and provide, at long last, some level of closure for victims and their families. I thank the Minister again for his work on this issue, and encourage him to continue to refine and develop the scheme to ensure that no one affected or infected is left out or left waiting for justice.

3.42 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): First, I want to express my gratitude to Members of the House who have elected me as the designated chair of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood. I say "designated" because we are lacking a Conservative officer in the group, so we cannot register it in the normal way—

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I would be delighted to volunteer to fill that gap for the hon. Gentleman.

Clive Efford: The right hon. Gentleman would be most welcome, and I will pass on that information. I was hoping to tease someone out by saying that! It is an honour and a challenge to follow on from the excellent leadership of my right hon. Friend and colleague, the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson). She will be an extremely tough act to follow. She was forced to stand down from the role because she was appointed to the Government.

I welcome the progress that the Government are making and I welcome today's regulations. For many, however, the victories that were celebrated when Sir Brian Langstaff made his final report and Sir Robert Francis was appointed to lead the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, were, rather than the beginning of the end, mere milestones on a path with many miles still to go. The fear among many campaigners is that the Cabinet Office, which was responsible for delay and obfuscation over decades, is now back in charge of the compensation scheme.

I know that the Minister is earnest in his wish to see the victims of this scandal given the justice they deserve, and that he understands that we are where we are because the campaigners refused to be silenced. They took on the establishment and won, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham and I cheered them on and promised to deliver for them without equivocation should we get into government.

There has been progress, and we welcome today's regulations, but for too many the euphoria has been replaced by frustration, leading to anger and a growing fear of betrayal. That stems from the fact that the campaigners feel that they are excluded from the process they brought into being. Decisions that they insisted should not be made without them are being made without the openness and candour the Government are legislating for. The Government have an excellent opportunity, ahead of that legislation, to show what candour means in public office. That is particularly true of how the tariff has been arrived at.

For the campaigners, it is like they have won the war, only to see those they vanquished put in charge of delivering the peace. There is growing unease that this is leading to the same tactics as before: delays, lack of

information about how decisions are arrived at and lack of communication from the Cabinet Office. That lack of communication is causing people to look to small charitable organisations for advice, as they struggle to understand the complex compensation process. Will Ministers commit to providing support to those organisations, so that they can continue that work, as was recommended by Sir Brian Langstaff?

I understand that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority is starting to engage with the Haemophilia Society and campaigning groups about the process and technical matters, but there is an urgent need for much more engagement than has happened thus far. We are told that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority intends to settle 20 cases by the end of the year. Why only 20? How will they be selected? The victims call these the Willy Wonka golden tickets. In the meantime, while these 20 cases are completed, another 14 people are likely to die—one victim dies on average every four days.

Justice delayed is justice denied. When Sir Brian Langstaff published his interim report in April 2023, he appealed to the Government to get on with the compensation scheme, because he was alarmed that so many people were dying without receiving the justice they deserved. That makes it imperative that people, whether infected or affected, receive the interim payments without delay. Regulations for those affected by the scandal will not be published until March 2025—yet another year on from Sir Brian's final report. Yet again, justice is delayed; yet again, victims will die without receiving compensation.

These are people who have suffered unspeakable harm: bereaved parents who lost children; bereaved children who lost parents and suffered bullying; bereaved partners who could not have families or who were advised to abort babies for fear they may have HIV; siblings who were bullied; and siblings who, under the tariff, are currently ruled out because they were over 18. There is so much more.

It is not possible to deal with these cases without understanding each individual's circumstances and the suffering they endured through so many years. What is needed is a bespoke system that meets individuals' needs, but that requires far more engagement than is currently happening. The lack of engagement with victims is leading to a lack of understanding about how decisions are reached and how compensation is calculated, fuelling mistrust in the process. Many victims, whether affected or infected, have lost their faith that the full extent of their suffering will be recognised through the compensation scheme. Indeed, some campaigners have concluded that their suffering will not be recognised through the compensation scheme and that they must return to court to get the compensation they deserve.

Those suffering from hep C do not understand why their experiences mean they receive different treatment from those with HIV. That requires urgent explanation. Again, the scale of the suffering needs to be looked at case by case, and there needs to be greater engagement, so that both sides understand the concerns. Why are people with hep C being offered much lower rates of compensation unless they are near death?

Similarly, the additional payments for those experimented on, of £10,000 or £15,000, have been met with widespread derision. My constituent, Mr Lee Moorey, was a pupil

at Treloar school. Having read his testimony to the inquiry, I share his sentiments. Will the Minister guarantee that that will be looked at?

We need to remind ourselves of the scale of the scandal and just how many people have died without justice. All along, people have had to fight to get justice, but they will only believe in justice if they have faith in the process. That requires the decisions to be made about them to be made with them. We have to restore their faith in the process. I understand that Sir Brian Langstaff has kept his inquiry open so that he can keep a watching brief. It would be a shame if the Chancellor, the Paymaster General or even the Prime Minister found themselves summoned before him.

Finally, my right hon. Friend promised that there will be a full debate in Government time on the scandal. When will that take place?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the spokesperson for the Scottish National party.

3.50 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford). In me, he has another willing volunteer to assist him in the group, as he knows. He is absolutely right to pay tribute to our former colleague, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), who led the group with such distinction and energy in the last Parliament. She was almost personally responsible for ensuring we had the legislative solution to take forward the compensation schemes.

I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), who made a significant difference when he took leadership on this issue for the last Government, after years of obfuscation, delay and dithering. The right hon. Gentleman got to grips with the matter and all the campaigners recognise what he brought to the role. I hope that this Minister does the same. We all acknowledge that he has made a good start. The points that the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst makes as chair as the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood are absolutely right. If he continues in that curious and investigatory style, we will continue to encourage the Government to do the right thing by the infected and the affected.

I am happy to say, with a great deal of satisfaction, that we have made significant progress. We are at the point of being able to deliver the scheme, and we will start to see payments to those who have needed support and compensation so badly throughout all these decades. My only slight criticism of the right hon. Member for Salisbury is that it is a pity that we did not get the opportunity to debate the issue in the last Parliament. There was an unsatisfactory statement from the former Prime Minister, who then just disappeared. There was no real opportunity to ask questions properly. I know he made an effort to address some of the concerns, but it would have been good to hear more at that point about how the schemes were being taken forward. The general election created a massive gap, after all the energy and activity that had been summoned up to resolve the issue, but we are where we are.

[Pete Wishart]

The final report by the infected blood inquiry was a fantastic piece of work. I pay tribute to everybody involved in it. They went about their jobs diligently and comprehensively, and we ended up with a wide-ranging report that shed a dramatic light on all the things that had gone wrong. It paved the way to create a positive way forward that is now beginning to deliver.

We must remember why we are here: thousands of people were caught up in probably the worst health scandal this country has ever endured. It is a failure of the British state that we ended up in a situation where people, through no fault of their own, contracted HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. When those who were caring for them raised concerns, they were constantly ignored and told, “There’s nothing to see here.” The inquiry was unequivocal that a compensation scheme must be set up immediately. The regulations we are debating today are essential for delivering that compensation scheme as quickly and effectively as possible.

I have been supporting victims of the infected blood scandal for about 20 years, since it was first brought to my attention by a constituent, who died about 10 years ago and is no longer with us. I remember the frustrations of those early years when I was constantly writing on behalf of this constituent just to be stonewalled—to be told that there was nothing to see and nothing further to be considered. It was that reluctance to take these issues seriously that defined those early years.

I said to the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Salisbury, that I hoped we would get some sort of separate investigation into why Members of Parliament were consistently deceived and—I shall say this—lied to by people working in the Department of Health. We were constantly writing letters on behalf of our constituents, and the replies were clearly rubbish. As a recipient of several of those letters from Ministers, I want to know why I was deceived in the way that I was. I pay tribute to Andy Burnham: he recognised this and he actually signed many of those letters as the former Health Secretary. I want to know how this came to his desk and why he actually did this.

The key thing is, as other Members have said, that the groups that are representing the community are properly listened to and are engaged in the construction of the regulations. It is too late for the regulations we are debating, but when it comes to the affected, the representative groups have to be central to the design of the new regulations. I say that because they have real life experience of this matter. They know what the issues are. They have fought for decades to get to this stage to secure this justice and compensation. I know that there is frustration. I saw the Minister screwing his face in response to the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst, but those groups do feel frustrated. They feel that they are being ignored, that their concerns are not being taken seriously, and that they are getting generic general replies from the Minister instead of detailed, proper responses to their issues.

Nick Thomas-Symonds *rose*—

Pete Wishart: I will give way to the Minister if he will explain to me exactly why that is happening.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I just want to say that the hon. Member should read nothing into that facial expression. When I close this debate, I shall talk in detail about the consultation that has taken place. That includes the extensive consultation that Sir Robert Francis undertook during the election campaign—the period between me and the right hon. Member for Salisbury being in office. That was hugely important. The Government have listened and have made significant changes to the scheme. It is not about giving generic replies, as the hon. Member has suggested. The Government will continue to move extremely carefully and listen to concerns, and the Infected Blood Compensation Authority will do the same.

Pete Wishart: I am to grateful to the Minister for his response. I look forward to his summing up, as I know that he will sincerely try to address these matters, but I say to him that all I am doing is reflecting the concerns that I have heard from the groups that I have worked with so closely over the years. There is a sense that they are not being taken all that seriously and that they are not getting the responses and the information that they think are important.

The Minister mentioned Sir Robert Francis. There has been nothing other than glowing praise for the way that Sir Robert has carried out his business. I know that he had a useful and productive meeting with representatives of Haemophilia Scotland where everything was aired and properly discussed. There is absolutely no complaint from anybody in this House about the way that Sir Robert Francis has gone about his business. He has been up and down the country listening to the groups. But there are certain things that only the Minister can respond to, particularly when it comes to policy decisions. That is why I encourage him to hold a debate on them. He has said that he is prepared to do so, which I am grateful for, and that he has perhaps been misunderstood. The community must be given the information and advice that they require.

There are a couple of matters that I hope the Minister will address in his closing remarks. I will not repeat some of the points that have already been raised, as I know he has taken a note of them. Sir Robert Francis proposed an additional autonomy award under the supplementary route for those who had been subjected to the unethical treatment and experiments that have been described. Although that is welcome, it is not clear how the figures have been arrived at, so I would like a little more clarity on that. How have these figures been calculated?

One issue that possibly has not been raised today is those with hepatitis C who were treated with interferon. Early treatment methods for the eradication of hepatitis C had many negative side effects, which were extremely difficult to go through and had a lasting effect on those treated. Is that a group that the Minister will consider?

The future operation of support schemes is also important. The decision to continue existing support scheme payments for life for those who were registered with a scheme before 1 April 2024 was a welcome development. The House will know how important that is to me as a Scottish Member of Parliament, as we had a very effective, productive and useful support scheme that I think will now be concluded and no longer open to new members. I would like to hear a little more on that point.

Sir Robert's report said:

"The benefits offered by the scheme to eligible recipients for financial and other support services should be no less than those offered by any of the current support schemes."

I want to know whether that is still the Government's position. It is also assumed, based on Sir Robert's recommendation, that all the benefits of the support schemes will continue. It would be good if the Government could confirm their position at an early date so that individuals have clarity on their future entitlements.

Under the regulations, the Minister has the power to make arrangements for the provision of support and assistance to applicants or potential applicants for compensation under the infected blood compensation scheme. Sir Robert Francis has identified three groups to which the Minister might usefully apply that prerogative: IBCA-funded legal representation, IBCA-funded financial support from an independent financial adviser and IBCA-funded legal support to executors of estates where there are complex matters to resolve in determining entitlements and access to an independent mediation service.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) spoke about the need to ensure that representative groups are properly supported and resourced to continue their vital advocacy work on behalf of so many in the community. I would like the Minister to say a little more about the willingness of the Government to ensure that those groups are properly funded. The effort that they have put in over decades—sometimes in a solitary exercise by two or three people—is extraordinary and should be recognised as part of the scheme.

We are looking forward to the next round, and it is important that we go forward. I have queries, which I know the Minister will probably address, about why only 20 people have been contacted, as the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst mentioned. I have no idea why it is only 20, so perhaps the Minister can tell us a little more about the rationale. It is right that the system be tested to see whether it is robust before it is opened to a wider community, but he has to say a little more about why it is those 20.

I am not having a go at the Minister, who I think is doing a good job; I am here to congratulate him and encourage him ever so gently to get moving just that little bit faster. We have had decades of obfuscation, a lack of progress, and people dying as they waited for compensation. This matter now sits on the Minister's shoulders. We will be watching him and keeping an eye on it. I know that there will be regular updates to the House. Believe me, we will all be here to ensure that he is doing the right thing by the victims.

4.2 pm

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on the way he spoke to the House. He spoke firmly, with a sense of urgency and great clarity in his use of English, which was very much appreciated. The truth of the matter is that there is a deeply ingrained scepticism in the community we are talking about. Words, in the end, will not count; actions will. Of course, today we are taking significant action on the road.

When we reflect on the views of victims and their relatives, it is hardly surprising that there has been a breakdown in trust. It always seems to be the case that the British establishment's first reaction when there is a

disaster is to close ranks, deny the truth and not listen to the victims. It is only in recent times that victims' voices have begun to be heard. With disasters such as the Post Office scandal, the policing of the miners' strike or Hillsborough, the establishment always closed ranks.

The Langstaff report is very clear. First, it says—this goes to the root of the scepticism that people feel—that, from the 1940s, Governments of different parties were fully aware of the scientific opinion that these actions could infect recipients of blood transfusions. Sir Brian Langstaff says that the disaster did not happen by accident. He tries to imagine what it must be like for those suffering the agony of being victims, and then being refused the truth that a wrong had been done by successive Governments.

My constituent Katie has been in touch with my office. Her dad died in the 1980s when she was an infant. Imagine living life with a cloud upon you after losing your father when young, because of negligence by operatives of the state and the cover-up that followed.

The only way we can reduce the scepticism is for the payments to begin to flow through. In the meantime, there is clearly a wish for some reassurance from the Minister today. He has made some of these points already, but I will go back to them.

First, someone who lost her father in the '80s when she was two will probably struggle to find the appropriate evidence, as she is not necessarily skilled enough to search for it forensically. Langstaff discovered—this is shocking—that documents were destroyed knowingly by the Government of the day because they thought that it might incriminate them. It was an establishment cover-up of some scale. How can victims establish that they deserve justice if documents have been lost or even wilfully destroyed? The Minister mentioned that, but we need to hear more from him about it either today or in the coming period.

Secondly, as other Members have said, civil society groups have the confidence of the victims—the Haemophilia Society is one, but my constituent mentioned Tainted Blood, of which the Minister is probably aware. It would be helpful if the Minister said that he and the Government are open to further conversations with civil society groups, which can speak on behalf of victims. It is important that the victims' voices are heard, and because those groups have the confidence of victims, those exchanges and that dialogue would be very helpful.

The Minister referred to one of the central requests that have been made. We are dealing with people who do not necessarily have large resources to employ representatives such as lawyers and other advisers. The Minister indicated that the Government are open to victims having their own representatives. However, if the Government are to encourage the appointment of such representatives, it must be clear that they are not appointees of the Government; they must see themselves as representatives of the victims. Otherwise, people will not have the necessary trust in them.

That brings me to my final point. I can imagine the kinds of conversation that the civil service has had with Ministers about this matter over decades: "Minister, you may be dealing with billions of pounds. You have a duty to ensure that every single penny is properly spent, so please exercise care in any announcements you make." I imagine that those conversations happen on most days. Of course we have a duty to protect money, and

[Jon Trickett]

very significant amounts will have to be spent to compensate people properly, but equally there is a duty to deliver justice to the people who were treated by state actors in a shabby and disgraceful way over decades. When there is a lack of paperwork and victims are perhaps very ill or dying, how will we secure value for money for the taxpayer while delivering justice for people who have struggled for decades as a result of Government negligence? I leave those thoughts with the Minister and hope that he will address them in his reply.

Like other Members, I hope that as the scheme is rolled out and we establish confidence among the victims, the Government will organise opportunities for the Minister to come back to the House so that we can raise constituents' questions and establish a more trusting relationship between the Government, who are doing dramatic work on this matter, and the people who have suffered for decades.

4.9 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Hon. Members on both sides of the House have made many fine contributions, some of which have been very detailed. You will be pleased to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that mine will hopefully be quite simple.

There are two words that I would like everybody to consider: urgency and trust. Those were the words that summarised the feelings of my Burgess Hill constituent Graham Knight when I spoke to him recently. Graham is not sure precisely when he was infected, but he thinks it was probably in 1987 while he was having his appendix removed. It was not until 2002 that he was finally diagnosed with hepatitis C. He told me that every day he has woken up since then has been a bonus. Needless to say, there has been a vast impact not only on his health, but on his professional life, his personal life and relationships and his social life. In 2003, Graham lost his business; the next year, as a consequence, all the family savings were gone.

There has been an enormous impact on Graham's marriage to Sue. Graham and Sue are fearless, determined, strong people. He told me that before he became poorly they had two to three good years of happy, healthy marriage; I am pleased to say that they are still happily married, but Graham's hepatitis C has had a profound impact on them in the years since. Graham said that Sue did not deserve that in her marriage, but she has been steadfast and loyal throughout. Graham also has high praise for the team who have cared for him at Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals: the care he has received has been incredible.

Graham's asks are about urgency. He says that there has been a profound loss of trust among the infected blood community, and that nothing—nothing—will restore that trust until the payments are forthcoming. Victims need certainty, because they cannot plan for the future.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Trust and urgency were certainly raised by my constituent John, who emailed me recently following a meeting between legal representatives and members of the IBCA team to get an update. He said that

"big and elaborate apologies are not what is needed, it is what was promised regarding compensation settlements that we want to see actioned without further delays."

It is clear that my hon. Friend agrees, but I would like to hear her response.

Alison Bennett: I do agree. My hon. Friend is right that ensuring that compensation comes forward is of the utmost importance. I am sure it will be coming forward, but the urgency with which it does so is the key point here.

I end by emphasising the anguish that Graham and countless other victims still hold and carry with them every day. It is deep-seated, and it will not go away until the matter is settled and the payments are concluded. Urgency is now required to right this 40-year wrong.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Katie White to make her maiden speech.

4.13 pm

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): It is an honour to make my maiden speech, particularly on this critically important debate on the infected blood scandal. I ask the House to allow me a temporary shift in tone, so that I can celebrate the community that sent me here.

Like many hon. Members' constituencies, the constituency I have the privilege to represent, Leeds North West, is a new seat with a long history. I am sure most Members know where Leeds is, but I describe it as being right at the heart of the UK. I am deeply grateful to the thousands of voters who have put their trust in me, and as I said on election night, regardless of how they voted, I am determined to represent and serve our community in this place.

I begin by paying tribute to my immediate predecessors, both of whom are still Members of this House. I thank the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) for being gracious and friendly and for his commitment to our community, especially Guiseley, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) and his fantastic team for their commitment to our community and to tackling climate change. I also pay tribute to those who came before: Greg Mulholland, Paul Truswell and the late Harold Best, who all have a continued presence in the constituency. Those esteemed gentlemen have all fought for our communities, and I am honoured to stand on their shoulders, but I say "gentlemen" for good reason: I am proud to be the first woman ever to represent Leeds North West, the place where I was born and raised, as were my parents before me. Seeing more women elected to Parliament than ever before matters. It matters to the women and girls across our communities—to Alice in Otley, Navdeeb in Adel and Chloe in Horsforth. We have not had enough female MPs in my home city, but we are making up for lost time. Leeds now boasts the first female Chancellor ever, so there is progress, friends, progress.

Leeds North West has an incredible history. The stunning Norman church in Adel dates back to the 12th century; it is where my parents were married, where I was christened, and where my grandfather lies at rest. Further west is Otley Chevin. Members may not yet have had the chance to visit Otley Chevin, but we would not be here without it. The stone from the Chevin provided the foundations for this very Parliament when it was rebuilt in the 1840s. It should not be a surprise that it is Yorkshire that keeps this House grounded.

In Leeds North West, our feet are always planted firmly on that bedrock, but our eyes remain on the horizon, ready to embrace the future. Our constituency

is a vibrant hub of entrepreneurship and creativity, a legacy that continues to thrive today. Abraham Moon in Guiseley, a fabric company established in 1837, still supplies international fashion houses today, while EMIS—which began in the 1980s in Horsforth—now flourishes in beautiful Rawdon as the leading provider of data support to the NHS. We are home to West Yorkshire's only airport, Leeds Bradford, and I was pleased to meet with Jet2's chief executive officer Steve just this week to discuss how the aviation sector can innovate to decarbonise. Should Members wish to stop for a bite to eat, they should look no further than the thriving bars and restaurants of vibrant Horsforth. It is a constituency bursting with joyful community fairs and fetes, from Guiseley festival to Yeadon carnival and from Rawdon summer gala to the Arthington and Bramhope shows—that last one comes complete with a human fruit machine.

There is no stronger pride than Yorkshire pride, and our community spirit is a great source of strength. However, as in many places, people are feeling overwhelmed and concerned about their future and that of their children and grandchildren. Many of the people I have met on the doorstep also feel let down—let down by politicians and by the institutions they have put their trust in over decades. The infected blood scandal is the most extreme and harrowing example of such systematic failure: people placed their trust in doctors and the Government to protect them, and that trust was betrayed. I am proud that this Government and this Prime Minister will introduce a duty of candour law to prevent future cover-ups like the infected blood and Post Office scandals.

I also share deep concerns about the other great challenges facing our community. Mental health figures are horrifying. The Global Mind Project has revealed that the UK has the highest rate of mental distress in the world and ranks second worst in overall mental health. People are working harder, yet getting unhealthier and unhappier, and of course, the climate and nature crisis looms.

We need things to change; the country voted for change, and it is change that propelled me into politics. My journey began with the climate crisis. We know that if we get it wrong, we face disaster—particularly for the most vulnerable among us—but if we get it right, we unlock enormous opportunities for our society. In 2003, I joined the local Leeds branch of Friends of the Earth and launched a campaign for the UK's first climate change Bill. Everyone told me that it was impossible; that it was too ambitious and too radical. There was no way that the Treasury would ever allow a carbon budget—but, friends, they did. We turned that campaign into the fourth most supported campaign in Parliament's history, with cross-party backing from Members across the House. The last Labour Government turned that Bill into an Act in 2008, under my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband), whom I am honoured to be working with again. Under this Act, Britain decarbonised faster than any other rich country. This Act has now become a global benchmark adopted by other nations—and that, I say to my hon. Friends, is what global leadership looks like.

Why am I sharing this? It is because politics must be about real change or it is about nothing. I want to serve our community, and improve our schools, healthcare

and public services. When I think about change, I think about my grandmother, Marjorie Simms. She challenged the status quo. She lived in Horsforth in the 1950s. There were not that many women driving then, but Marjorie did. There were not that many women wearing trousers, but Marjorie did. Marjorie developed breast cancer, and most parents in the 1950s avoided talking to their children, but Marjorie showed them her mastectomy so they could understand. She died at 43, the age I entered Parliament. Marjorie did things differently and her spirit lives on in me. We have seen too much promise and too little delivery in recent years—endless debates about challenges, but a lack of energy for real solutions. Politics should be about action, not just words.

The seeds of change can be seen within our communities. As a Government, our role is to water them and create the conditions for them to flourish. Leeds North West is willing to play its role in full. We have the leaders, we have the ideas and we have the “get stuff done” attitude that personifies Yorkshire—like the students I met recently at Ralph Thoresby and Green Meadows or the cadets in my constituency, who are ambitious about the difference we can make; like the Horsforth shed set up a couple of years ago by ex-teachers based on the national men's shed model and supporting male mental health, but expanded to include many other vulnerable members of the community; like those from Otley 2030 who decided they wanted to be a beacon of hope and created a living laboratory in the town to create climate friendly and sustainable solutions where people and nature thrive; and like Brian who, after a death in Morrisons car park in Guiseley, set up defibrillators all over the community so that lifesaving equipment is on hand and there is a network of community activists servicing them. Let us not forget the gold medal Olympians in our community—the Brownlee brothers and the cyclist Tom Pidcock—who inspire us all with their dedication and achievements. We are indeed a hotbed of world-class talent.

People in Leeds North West do not wait for change to come to them; they make it happen. They are the doers and the problem solvers, and I will play my role in that same way. I will champion the green agenda by focusing on practical solutions that carve a British path towards a successful green transition. We will leverage our strengths, whether it is world-leading research, supporting our best business minds, or unlocking the public and private investment needed to turbocharge a green economy. I will support the health of our community—mental health, physical health, community health—and I want to support our entrepreneurs and creativity to grow our region. I promise to be a ferocious champion for my community, my beloved Yorkshire and our country, and I will do it with joy. It may recently have become more fashionable across the pond, but I have been measuring with joy for years, and there is always space for a little more joy.

Finally, I promise to listen, learn and reflect. No one has all the answers, but all of us have some of them. I commit to working constructively and collectively. I will endeavour to arrive with curiosity and non-judgment, because if we want to change the way we do things, we must start in this moment, in this place and with these actions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Having been a student at Leeds, I look forward to an invitation.

4.23 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Katie White) on an excellent maiden speech, and I have no doubt that Marjorie would be extremely proud to see her here.

I thank the Minister for bringing this motion before the House. As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) graphically illustrated earlier in the debate, the trauma of this shameful scandal goes way beyond physical suffering. Indeed, it has gone through generations as people have sadly passed away from the infected blood that they received. I welcome the Government's bringing this motion to the House fairly swiftly after the general election, because it is high time that this shameful episode was finally brought—appropriately and comprehensively—to some kind of conclusion.

I am here to put on the record the story of my constituent Philip, who, after 50 years, told me that he wanted his story to be shared publicly for the first time. I met his wife on the doorstep when I was canvassing for the general election, and she asked me whether, if I won the seat, I would raise the issue of the infected blood scandal when I arrived in this House.

Philip was diagnosed with haemophilia B at the age of 11. He said that by the late 1970s, he was probably infected via contaminated blood products, although he was not diagnosed with hep C until the late 1980s. Although very ill, he had a demanding job and a young family, so he kept working.

Philip said:

"The illness and the subsequent aggressive treatment with the then experimental drug interferon was only half the issue for haemophiliacs like me. The world was scared of AIDS and other viral infections and the press and politicians at the time made it worse with doomsday advertising 'Don't die of ignorance'. In hindsight this slogan was a cruel irony as we only found out 30 years later that our ignorance was engineered by those in power.

As a haemophiliac I could not discuss or disclose my condition. My boss at the time would not shake my hand or consume food or drink I had prepared. I eventually moved jobs to get away from the ignorance. I continued to keep knowledge of my haemophilia to close family and friends."

Philip eventually left his job because of fatigue caused by the hep C infection, and even at that point in 2008, he was not able to give the true reasons for leaving to his employer. He said:

"As an infected person, this has had a physical and mental impact on me for decades. The impact of the delays to the compensation scheme on me, my wife and two children as affected people continues.

As a community we have waited over 35 years for recognition, compensation and closure. During that time over 3,000 haemophiliacs have died and more continue to die every week without knowing their families are secure. I consider myself to be one of the lucky ones that has survived, but why are we continually subjected to more stress caused by government deadlines that pass and communications updates that say the same as the last one?

The payment schemes are already detailed, so why is there any further delay? The latest delay is whilst the IBCA test the compensation framework on a small group to check it works. Do the government have any idea how this makes infected people feel? Some of us are guinea pigs all over again."

I have used Philip's words because they are much stronger than anything that I could say on this subject. Although I welcome the Minister's statement and am

pleased to hear that some payments have begun, I urge him to ensure that progress is swift and that those who have been affected by the scandal will also receive compensation swiftly. We have heard a lot from hon. Members about siblings and the children of people who were infected. Applications must also open for the estates of those who have sadly not survived long enough to outlive this process, which should have been resolved many years ago.

We have talked a lot this afternoon about the feeling of shame that this terrible tragedy happened in the first place. I add my voice to those of others in the House urging swift compensation not only for everybody who has been infected by this scandal, but for affected families, including siblings of loved ones who have died. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) said, trust is the most important thing, so we need to make sure that there is clarity, that people can understand exactly what is happening, that they can find information online and can apply easily, and that once they have applied, they will be assured of swift compensation payments. They will never get true justice, but compensation is the best that we can do in this circumstance.

4.28 pm

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): There have been many stories told of infected blood in this debate, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale), who told a very similar story to that of the constituent I will talk about this afternoon. These are stories of pain, injustice and, ultimately, state failure.

I come to the Chamber to give the account of my constituent, Brian, and his late mother, Roberta Wilson Murray. In the mid-1980s, Roberta entered hospital to receive treatment for an ulcer in her stomach. Complications in that procedure meant that she required a blood transfusion, and on 13 and 15 July 1985 she received 30 units of blood. Those units contained infected blood, which led to Roberta contracting hepatitis C. At that time, her daughter was just 10 years old, and her son was just six. Even though in that moment Roberta's life had changed forever, she did not know, because it was not until 2002—17 years later—that she found out her condition. In a routine test for high blood pressure, she was casually but devastatingly informed that she had hep C. Ever since that fateful visit to the hospital, and for the rest of her life, she was in and out of hospital. In July 2020 Roberta passed, just two months before her 49th wedding anniversary with her husband.

For 35 years, Roberta's health was plagued by a virus that for more than half of that time she did not even know she had contracted. When she did find out, as in other cases that Members have spoken about, she lived with great stigma in work and in her social life. The truth is that the state failed Roberta, and not just in 1985 but at every single step of the way since.

The scandal of infected blood transfused into patients is, as we have heard in this debate, one of the greatest injustices of our time. For more than half a century, tens of thousands of people, including my late constituent, have suffered. They were let down by the very institutions that we are supposed to trust and rely upon most. Nobody would think that in an NHS hospital the treatment that someone was receiving would be a death sentence, but that is what it was for many people. As is

so often the case with such scandals, the initial injustice was worsened by the cover-up and obstruction of truth that followed. Whether it is infected blood, the Post Office scandal more recently or the collapse of a stadium, these injustices must never be allowed to happen again.

It is one of the core duties of a Member of Parliament to identify and expose failures in state bureaucracy. That is why it is so important that this Government will bring forward a legal duty of public candour. The pain and injustice that these acts have fostered must never be allowed to happen again, but the truth is that for families such as Brian's, the damage has already been done. There is ultimately nothing we can do to fully compensate them for the pain and trauma they have endured, but we all owe it to the thousands impacted to make sure that the compensation process is swift, transparent and fair. I am pleased that the Government have made it a priority to get this compensation scheme under way, and it is critical that these measures can pass through Parliament quickly. There can be no more delay.

In that spirit, I ask the Minister to write to me to give an indication of when my constituent and his family can expect to see the compensation they are owed. The Murray family, like everyone else impacted by this horrendous injustice, deserve nothing less.

4.33 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I thank all Members for their moving contributions, especially those who have advocated for constituents impacted by this terrible injustice and shared their stories. I welcome the pledge to deliver this important payment scheme swiftly. However, I urge the Minister to look at the losses of those family members who provided care. In many cases, including that of my constituent Debra, who cared for many years for her husband Barrie, bereaved partners and family carers gave up careers, sacrificing pensions and facing many additional costs. Concerns about the care award have been expressed by organisations such as Tainted Blood, which was mentioned earlier. A just care award must take all those factors into account. Will the Minister ensure fair care costs for the bereaved?

4.34 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): We have heard some incredibly eloquent, moving and substantial speeches today, and I pay tribute to all of them. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Katie White) on a fantastic maiden speech, which was a celebration of women in Parliament, all her work on the climate and, of course, Yorkshire.

In my first few months as the Member for Welwyn Hatfield, nothing has left a greater mark on me than meeting Mike and Diana Blake. The Blake family are victims of the contaminated blood scandal who have been fighting for justice with grace and determination for nearly four decades. As I told the House in July, Stuart Blake, their son, was infected with contaminated blood in 1985, when he was just six years old. Stuart was infected with HIV and hepatitis C. He suffered throughout his childhood and passed away in 2006, aged just 27. Stuart was infected two years before I was born, but 39 years later his parents are still waiting for compensation.

The agonising story of the Blake family will be all too familiar to hon. Members across the House who, as we have heard today, represent constituents who have suffered tragic loss and then seen the state close ranks about the depth of the crisis. As Sir Brian Langstaff concludes in his infected blood inquiry:

“A lack of openness, transparency and candour, shown by the NHS and government, such that the truth has been hidden for decades.”

Those of us who sit on these Benches today can never undo the suffering, but we can speak the truth about the experience of our constituents and demand that long-overdue compensation flows to their families. In that spirit, I commend my right hon. Friend the Minister for the decisive action he has taken since assuming office and echo his recent comments on compensation, when he said

“it means nothing if people don't get their compensation quickly and efficiently.”

I welcome the news that he expects payments to begin to be made by the end of the year, but echo the calls made on all sides of the House that those who are affected, not just infected, receive their payments as soon as possible.

I would also be grateful for some further clarification on how the Infected Blood Compensation Authority will work with individuals and families to help them navigate the system. Specifically, I want to put on record my request that Mike and Diana Blake are assigned a dedicated case worker, a single point of contact to guide them through the application for compensation and ensure that, after all the years of turmoil, they finally receive what they are owed.

Earlier this year, the Prime Minister said that as a society we had collectively failed to protect some of our most vulnerable people. He was absolutely right. The state failed thousands of families for decades, and whether they were infected or affected, the duration of their suffering is unimaginable. We cannot ever put it right, but this Government will have my support in doing everything in their power to offer compensation and, where possible, some closure to those who have endured so much.

4.38 pm

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): Like others, I welcome the progress on the compensation scheme. Also like others, I would like to draw attention to two of my constituents who have suffered, and continue to suffer, because of the infected blood scandal.

First, there is my constituent who was infected with hepatitis C in 1993, two years after the cut-off date for the infected blood support scheme. As she told me at my surgery last week, her life has been utterly devastated. Her sense of betrayal is felt even more keenly because at the point of her infection all blood should have been tested for hepatitis C by law. She has suffered terrible physical and mental illness for most of her life, including infertility and anxiety from the stigma of her illness—which is why I do not mention her name—and she has experienced an impact on her personal relationships and career.

It was a cruel insult that my constituent, because she was infected after 1991 and was therefore not eligible for the infected blood support scheme, has been unable to access the crucial help that she needs to deal with the impacts I have mentioned. I welcome the removal of

[*Ian Sollom*]

those cut-off dates in the new scheme, but I urge the Government urgently to provide proper clarity on how the new scheme will work for her and others like her who were infected after 1991. They need the details of exactly how it will work for them, and when they can expect to review the compensation that they so greatly deserve.

Secondly, I would like to mention the case of my constituent whose mother sadly died from hepatitis C in 1998. In his communications with me, he has pointed out that the information available on the gov.uk website is very confusing, as others have mentioned. He finds it often poorly written, which only adds to his frustration and emotional stress. Understandably, his main concern is that payments to the estates of those who have died from being given infected blood will be deprioritised and not excluded from any heads of loss. As others have pointed out, processes that delay these payments will result in many elderly affected people dying before receiving anything. Can the Government give assurances that siblings and children left behind now and in future will have the compensation safeguarded and will also receive what they rightly deserve?

4.41 pm

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): Like so many today, I welcome this Government acting to ensure that the infected blood victims receive the compensation that they have long been owed. Not long after being elected, I met one of my constituents who is a victim of the scandal. He was a core participant in the inquiry, and his case is referenced anonymously in the report. Meeting him and hearing his story, about his fight for justice and the impact it has had on his life and his family, will forever remain with me.

As a teenager, my constituent, who was being treated for haemophilia, went in for his annual health check. He was asked to wait outside by the doctor, who he trusted to act in his best interests. The doctor informed my constituent's father that his son had HIV and did not have long to live. His father was tasked with conveying this earth-shattering news to his son. I am relieved that he has defied the odds and is still here today, but let us be clear that the word "scandal" does not do justice to what happened to these people, who were simply accessing healthcare.

My constituent welcomed the recommendations of the inquiry, the work by Sir Robert Francis and the action that this Government took immediately upon taking office to work to provide swift compensation to those impacted. He further welcomed the statements from the Paymaster General and the Prime Minister, and the acknowledgement that the state, through successive Governments, failed to protect some of the most vulnerable people in this country. That acknowledgment was really important to him, because he and others—all those who have been referenced today and beyond our doors, both infected and affected—have waited far too long for justice.

It is welcome that, following feedback, the Government have made a series of changes, including the regular support payments, new routes for those seeking bespoke compensation claims and packages for those subjected

to unethical testing. It is positive that the Infected Blood Compensation Authority has begun the steps to deliver this scheme and ensure that compensation payments are made as soon as possible, and that the payments will start by the end of the year, because victims have already waited too long. As Sir Robert Francis has said, that can provide a credible means of offering significant and, in many cases, life-changing sums to persons infected and affected by this terrible scandal. I thank the Paymaster General for his recent response to queries that I raised on behalf of my constituent, and for the assurances that he gave in that correspondence, which my constituent very much appreciated. Might I ask a final question, though, that my constituent has put to me on the legal fees that those campaigning have accrued? Is there potential for those to be covered, rather than their being covered by people's compensation payments? Although I welcome the swift action we have taken, we should never, ever have been in this position, and no amount of compensation can ever match the distress and the pain that this scandal has caused, compounded by the long delay in accessing justice.

I will end by reiterating what others have said, because the motion before us is a testament to those, including my constituent, who have fought for decades to bring justice to those impacted. I pay tribute to all of them, as it is their work that has brought us to where we are today. I cannot imagine how it will feel to finally receive the recognition and the acknowledgment of what has happened. It is incumbent on us to ensure that it happens swiftly and provides proper recourse. I hope that, as a result of the action that we are already taking by introducing the Hillsborough law and the wider duty of candour, we can deliver a culture change so that no one will ever have to fight for justice like that again.

4.45 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I note that time is short. I will get through as many of the points that have been raised as I can, but I say to all right hon. and hon. Members that my door is very much open; please do follow up with a letter to me if there are specific points that you want me to provide a more detailed response to. I would be more than happy to do that.

In this debate we should always start with the victims at the forefront of our minds—what they went through, and how long, unfairly, they had to fight for justice. Several Members have raised the excellent work that support groups do, in supporting victims and providing advocacy for them. The Government will be engaging with those groups. The Government will be asking what more support is required. Several Members asked about that; the Government will take that work forward.

I will try to move through the points on the basis of the order in which they were raised, starting with the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen). He can certainly take my assurance that the Government are in rapid delivery mode. The point he made about complexity is a fair one. In addition to the explanatory memorandum there was an explainer, and there were case studies, published on gov.uk. I know, too, that the IBCA will provide direct support to each individual who applies for compensation. There will be caseworkers to seek to ensure that individuals understand how the scheme works and the choices they can make. Work is under way on the second set of regulations. In drafting the

new explanatory memorandum I will take on board the point that was made by the Committee, and by the right hon. Member for Salisbury, and use plain and simple English wherever possible.

I have set out a number of times in the House that payments will be beginning by the end of 2024. A number of Members asked about the initial 20. The reason for that is that the IBCA is adopting a test-and-learn approach. Taking an initial representative group is the best way subsequently to ramp up the process to be as swift as possible. That has been done with the objective of getting money out of the door as quickly as possible. Of course it will now be for the IBCA to build a service that balances speed with ease of use—and of course data security, which I know would be another concern for the House.

On the second set of regulations about the supplemental route in respect of the infected and the affected, I am saying not that they will be laid by 31 March 2025 but that, subject to the vote of this House, I want them to have passed through the House by that date. I want us to move as swiftly as we possibly can.

The decision on the sequencing—the split between the infected and the affected that the Government have adopted in these regulations—was made on the basis that it would allow orderly implementation of the legal framework without impacting or delaying the delivery timetable for payments to the infected and the affected. As I have said, I hope for, and am sure that I will have, the House's assistance in ensuring that the regulations can be approved by 31 March next year. I may have misunderstood the point made by the right hon. Member for Salisbury about an impact assessment, but the equality impact assessment is on the Government website. As for the question of cost, he has not long to wait now; he will be able to study the Budget Red Book next week.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) has been an extraordinarily powerful advocate for the Smith family. I do not think any of us can ever imagine the pain of losing a child in those circumstances. I hope that she heard my reassurance about the work of charities, and the work that the Government will now do to engage with the groups.

I have been asked a number of times about our next action, which involves the interim payments for the estates of the deceased infected. I promise that the deadline of the end of October will be met, and I will update the House tomorrow during Cabinet Office questions. I have also been asked about further opportunities to debate this issue. I have already promised that there will be a debate this year about progress on the implementation of Sir Brian Langstaff's 12 recommendations. Compensation is obviously one of them, and I am sure that the House will understand why I am trying to drive that forward as quickly as I can, but the others are hugely important as well, and will be debated in the House.

Ian Lavery: One recommendation was for the establishment of a memorial, or memorials, in all the countries of the United Kingdom. Can my right hon. Friend update me on where we are with that?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I hope to be able to make an announcement about it shortly. I have told the House previously how important I think the memorialisation

proposals are, and they will certainly form part of the update that I will give the House before the end of the year.

I join the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), in congratulating the students whom she has had with her and on the work that they did in researching this subject for her speech. What she said about a culture of cover-up was important. What Sir Brian Langstaff said was not that there was some specific conspiracy between individuals, but that there was something far more pervasive, which he described as a culture of "institutional defensiveness". People and institutions put their own reputations above the public interest, and to tackle that the Government will be pushing forward with a duty of candour. That, in my view, will be a powerful lever that the House can pull for change, but it is not just about a change in the law. It is about leadership as well, and it is about culture and changing the culture, in order to bring about a system in which the public interest is put first and we collectively do all that we can to minimise the chances of a repetition of what has happened in relation to not just this scandal but others, such as Horizon and Hillsborough.

The hon. Lady and a number of other Members asked about the severity bands. The scheme is tariff-based, and the tariffs were developed through the work of the infected blood inquiry response expert group, whose members were appointed by the right hon. Member for Salisbury when he was Paymaster General. They were clinical and legal advisers, assisted by social care specialists. The Government then chose to improve the scheme after the engagement exercise that Sir Robert Francis carried out, as I mentioned to the right hon. Gentleman during the general election campaign.

The comparison between HIV and hepatitis C has been raised. For people infected with hepatitis C there are four severity bands, and they are designed in line with clinical diagnostic markers. Recognised health conditions, for example liver damage, have, therefore, been informed by the work of the expert group. It is correct that in comparison there is a single severity band for people infected with HIV. That is because HIV is a lifelong infection. The vast majority of people infected with HIV through blood products have experienced progression to advanced symptomatic HIV disease, including AIDS conditions, and have died as a consequence of the infection. Those who survived continue to be severely impacted by the infection, and the view of the expert group was that it was disproportionately complex and onerous to disaggregate that category into different experiences, and that contrasted with hepatitis, where there is a wide range of experiences, including both acute infections with long-term limited impacts and very serious and ultimately fatal infections. That is the approach, based on the expert group, that the Government have adopted.

Similarly, on siblings, which several Members have raised, the scheme is based on recommendations from Sir Robert Francis's framework compensation study. It does not exclude siblings over 18 who may have been carers and provided care.

John Glen: Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that when he assessed the June engagement exercise that Sir Robert Francis supervised, he did not resist any of

[John Glen]

the recommendations from the expert group that interrogated the scheme—apart from four or five where he thought the Government could do better—and there was no attempt either by the previous Government or his to resist the advice of the expert group who are engaged with the communities?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He took exactly the same approach that I did to the expert group. I accepted, as I told the House, 69 of the 74 recommendations, including, crucially, the continuation of the support schemes. On the other five, there were reasons of simplicity or speed—of getting compensation to people more quickly. I hope the House will take the assurance that there is that imperative to act as quickly as possible.

Sarah Olney: I am exceptionally grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's explanation of how the different tariffs have been arrived at, which aids comprehension. However, will he also explain a little more about what the expert group did to engage with the affected communities so that they can better understand the tariff for themselves?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and I have indicated, Sir Robert Francis engaged extensively around the country during the general election. The point the hon. Lady makes about continuously trying to make what is a complex scheme open and transparent is entirely fair and I share the desire to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) has constantly been a powerful voice for victims of the infected blood scandal. I have indicated in previous remarks that we will engage with the charities and groups on what more support we can give to them. On the 20 cases, that is about a test-and-learn approach to try to be able to ramp up the scheme and make it operate more quickly.

On the unethical research—an appalling and dreadful practice—the Government have accepted the amount of money that was suggested, but it should be emphasised always that these are not payments in isolation; they are just a part, and in the vast majority of cases will be a small proportion, of the amounts of money that will be paid out.

The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) spoke powerfully, and I echo his words about the former right hon. Member for Horsham, with whom I had a number of conversations about this matter. I know that he was concerned and wanted to drive the matter forward. The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford spoke powerfully about the two cases in his constituency and the need for closure, which is a hugely powerful emotion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) spoke powerfully about Jane Fitzgerald. She also spoke about Ronan Fitzgerald, who I understand is in the Gallery today and who is continuing the extraordinary fight for justice in which he has been engaged for so long. My hon. Friend asked a series of questions. If she writes to me with each of them, I will ensure that she receives a response.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor), who is back on the Liberal Democrat Benches, raised the issue of siblings, which I addressed a moment or two ago. He is entirely right to highlight the importance of communications and transparency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) steps into giant shoes as the chair-designate of the APPG, because my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) did an extraordinary job in taking this matter forward. He talked about different Government Departments. The Cabinet Office has led on this issue because of the history of the Department of Health in the 1970s and 1980s. That is why I and the previous Paymaster General took on this responsibility. My hon. Friend is right to emphasise that we should continue to engage with the infected blood community; that is a discussion I frequently have with the chair of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority, who I know shares my hon. Friend's desire to do so.

The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) asked me about legal support, and we have accepted that it should be provided. He talked about my powers in that regard, which have been exercised. That legal support will happen, and it is hugely important that it does. We want the tariff scheme to be as quick and accessible as possible, and we want people to have that level of support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) spoke powerfully of people's scepticism about state institutions. The introduction of a duty of candour is hugely important with regard to not only this scandal, but others such as Horizon and Hillsborough. His point about document destruction was very well made, but one of the reasons for using a tariff-based scheme, rather than having thousands of individual court cases, is precisely that the documents that are available can be treated more sensitively and on the basis of the balance of probabilities.

The hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) spoke extraordinarily movingly about her constituent Graham Knight, his wife Sue and the support that she provided.

It was a privilege to listen to a fantastic maiden speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Katie White), who is the first female Member of Parliament for her constituency. She spoke with great Yorkshire pride and about her constituents understandably feeling let down in the past. She certainly did not let them down today with her maiden speech, which was positive about the way that politics can deliver real change. I am sure it is the start of a very fine parliamentary career. Her grandmother, Marjorie Simms, would have been extraordinarily proud of her today.

The hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) spoke about her constituent Philip, who summed up one chilling aspect of this scandal when he said,

“our ignorance was engineered by those in power.”

It is worth reflecting on that sentence as we look at the changes that we will need to make, beyond ensuring that people receive compensation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee) spoke powerfully about his constituent, Roberta, and the stigma that she suffered. He also

spoke about the Murray family, and if he writes to me about their specific circumstances, I will ensure that he gets a response.

The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) spoke movingly about family members and carers, and I agree with her about their huge importance. My hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin) spoke about the Blake family. I think that caseworkers will be hugely important in the work of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority.

I note that, understandably, the first constituent the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) mentioned did not even want her name to be mentioned. That is an indication of the ongoing pervasive nature of this scandal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) spoke for all of us when she said it had taken far too long to reach justice. She is welcome to write to me about the point she raised. I think she was talking about legal fees that have already been incurred, but if she writes to me I will ensure that she gets a response.

Clive Efford: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his answers. Notwithstanding his reassurances, widespread concerns are still being expressed by those who have been affected or infected as a result of this scandal, so will he agree to a meeting with the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, in his Department, to discuss the issues that they still want to raise?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I would be only too delighted to engage with the all-party parliamentary group, and I am sure that if my hon. Friend sends an invitation in the usual way, we can find a mutually convenient date.

My hon. Friend has just referred to the all-party group, and the spirit in which this debate has been conducted is really important. It is crucial that that cross-party approach continues. We are dealing with people who have been failed by the state, and we must acknowledge that. The regulations we are debating ensure that we can finally deliver compensation to those who have fought so hard and waited so long for justice in the most harrowing of circumstances. They deserve nothing less, and I hope that colleagues across the House will join me in supporting the regulations. I commend them to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2024 (SI, 2024, No. 872), dated 22 August 2024, a copy of which was laid before this House on 23 August, be approved.

Sanctions: Iran

5.7 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I beg to move,

That the Iran (Sanctions) (Amendment) Regulations 2024 (SI, 2024, No. 944), dated 11 September 2024, a copy of which was laid before this House on 12 September, be approved.

These regulations amend the Iran (Sanctions) Regulations 2023. The instrument was laid before Parliament on 12 September under powers contained in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, and the measures entered into force the following day. As the Minister responsible for sanctions, I would like to start by setting out the Government's priorities in this area. Since coming into office, I have been clear that we must have the necessary powers and tools to implement and enforce our sanctions regimes effectively.

The proper implementation and enforcement of UK sanctions is critical to maximising their impact, and this Government are committed to improving the UK's track record on sanctions enforcement. That is why, on 10 October, we launched the Office of Trade Sanctions Implementation—OTSI—which enhanced civil enforcement powers to maximise the impact of the UK's trade sanctions. These powers include the ability to issue civil monetary penalties for sanctions breaches, and for OTSI to make details of breaches public. There are also new reporting requirements on sectors that are well positioned to find evidence of trade sanctions breaches. We have put in place similar civil enforcement powers for transport sanctions, aligning the enforcement of trade and transport sanctions with our approach to financial sanctions.

I have also brought together ministerial colleagues on sanctions enforcement, and colleagues in the Treasury, the Home Office, the Department for Business and Trade, the Department for Transport and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero are working towards a shared vision of how to enhance it. That will include ways in which we can further support UK overseas territories and Crown dependencies with their sanctions enforcement. We plan to be transparent on what we are doing, and I look forward to updating Parliament on enforcement actions in due course.

The Government have deployed sanctions in innovative and impactful ways, including in the sanctions package we are putting forward today. We have taken swift and decisive action to increase pressure on Russia's war machine, spearheading a call to action at the European Political Community in July to tackle Russia's shadow fleet. We have sanctioned 43 oil tankers that were transporting Russian oil, as well as nine liquefied natural gas vessels involved in shipping Russian LNG, including from Russia's flagship Arctic LNG 2 project, to target the Kremlin's energy revenues.

We have also enhanced our response to the threat from the Iranian regime, and I will now turn to the details of the instrument before us. It contains measures to deter the Government of Iran from causing regional and international instability, by disrupting its unmanned aerial vehicle and missile industries and its access to items critical for military development. I hope the House will support these important measures today.

The Iranian regime's development and proliferation of large volumes of advanced conventional weapons, including UAVs and missiles, continues to destabilise

[Stephen Doughty]

the middle east and also prolongs Russia's illegal war in Ukraine. Iran's use of an unprecedented number of UAVs and missiles during its attack on Israel on 13 April demonstrated how Iranian weapons development and proliferation is fuelling conflict and escalation in the middle east.

The Iranian regime also used hundreds of these arms in its attack against Israel on 1 October, which we condemn in the strongest terms. That attack once more endangered the lives of innocent civilians and escalated an already incredibly dangerous situation, and that cannot be tolerated. In response to Iran's 1 October attack on Israel, the UK has designated nine individuals and entities involved in facilitating Iran's destabilising activity. That includes senior military figures and the Iranian Space Agency, which develops technologies that have applications in ballistic missile development.

We are deeply concerned about the prospect of further escalation, and all efforts must now be concentrated on breaking the cycle of violence. At this moment, when tensions are at their peak, calm heads must prevail and all sides must take immediate steps to de-escalate. A regional war is, of course, in no one's interest. However, this is the latest incident in the long history of Iran destabilising the region, including through its political, financial and military support for its proxies and partners, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis and its aligned militia groups in Iraq and Syria. We have been clear and consistent that Iran must cease this support.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in giving way. Does he accept that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is a key component of the destabilisation sponsored by the Iranian regime? Will he update the House on the Government's thinking on proscribing that organisation? I think he would find many allies across the House who would be keen to see that happen.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. We of course recognise the huge threat that the IRGC poses, and we will take the necessary measures to counter it at home and around the world. He will understand that the Government keep the list of proscribed terrorist organisations under careful review, and we do not, of course, comment in the House on whether an organisation may be under consideration.

As I said, Iran is now one of Russia's top military backers and has supplied it with hundreds of UAVs since 2022, including different models of drones. Russia has used those to target Ukraine's critical infrastructure and to kill innocent civilians, prolonging the suffering of the Ukrainian people. In September, Iran supplied Russia with hundreds of close-range ballistic missiles. That is a further escalation of Iran's military support for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and will further enable Russia's invasion. In return, Iran is receiving Russian military and technological support, enabling it to further develop its military capabilities and enhancing the risk it poses to the region and beyond.

The legislation before us expands the UK's trade sanctions against Iran, with the aim of disrupting its UAV and missile industry and its access to items critical

to military development. It includes sanctions in relation to the items on the Russia common high priority list. The list, which was jointly agreed by the UK, the EU, the US and Japan in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, identifies items that Russia is using in its weapons systems, ranging from semiconductors to machine tools. Those items are also significant in Iran's production of advanced conventional weapons. As the House will know, there have been many public reports about Iran's supply of weapons to Russia. Through the instrument, we are therefore prohibiting the export, supply, delivery and making available of those items to Iran.

We are also prohibiting the provision of ancillary services associated with the goods, such as brokering services, technical assistance, financial services and funds. All the items prohibited by our partners in the EU in May are also prohibited by the instrument. In addition, prohibitions will be applied to some items identified by the Ministry of Defence as significant to Iran's UAV and missile industries.

We have also taken the opportunity to simplify some of the existing trade sanctions on Iran so that businesses are better able to implement them. These trade restrictions complement our existing export controls and sanctions, ensuring that no UK business or person, wherever they are in the world, can facilitate the export, transfer, supply, delivery and making available of these items to Iran without prior authorisation.

I hope that the House will support these measures. I commend them to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. May I remind Members that if they intend to speak in a debate, they need to be here for the opening? It is a particular discourtesy to the House if the Front-Bench spokespersons are not here at the beginning.

5.16 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): The Conservative party supports the regulations, which extend the Iran sanctions regime to drones and drone technology as well as financial services, funds and brokering services relating to items of strategic concern. However, these sanctions seek to address issues emblematic of a far larger threat. The Government should be in no doubt that Iran's malign influence is one of the biggest challenges to both global and British security. For decades, Iran has deliberately undermined the rules-based international order, destabilising its neighbourhood and funding terrorism globally, all while brutally repressing its own people and committing a femicide.

For years, the Iranian regime has created asymmetric threats, co-opted existing movements and provided weapons, money and training to its proxies and ideological partners. Be they Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen or Shi'a militias and the popular mobilisation forces across Iraq and Syria, they are terrorist organisations that have no interest in their local people and instead pursue the aims of the ayatollah; hostage captors and committers of the worst atrocity against the Jewish people since the Holocaust; and actors disrupting maritime traffic in the Red sea, a sea link that is vital for the delivery of food and fertiliser to countries facing serious hunger crises in east Africa and south Asia.

As the Minister set out, Iran is now embedding itself in conflict on our own continent, transferring hundreds of attack drones and, as we now know, ballistic missiles to Russia to prop up its barbaric, illegal and unprovoked renewed invasion of Ukraine. They are fuelling a war machine that seeks to dismantle a sovereign democratic state in Europe and enabling the murder of Ukrainians every single day. The Government must now allow Ukraine's use of long-range weaponry on strategic targets. Escalation warrants a response or further deterrence will be undermined. The invasion of Ukraine is an attack on us all. Iran is that hand in glove for Russia, the perpetrator.

Here at home, there have been numerous Iranian plots to assassinate British or UK-based individuals whom the regime considers its enemies. The UK has had to respond to more than 15 such plots since 2022. We have seen Iranian cut-outs investigated for spreading IRGC propaganda and for glorifying sanctioned individuals and terrorists. We have seen IRGC generals providing radicalising lectures here in our capital city. Even on our streets, we have seen people glorifying organisations such as the Houthis and others who are not acting in defence of Gaza and who are not progressive movements; they are terrorists. Iran has also arbitrarily detained and imprisoned British citizens, including Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, whose shocking ordeal proves beyond doubt Iran's disdain for human rights and human dignity.

As the Conservative Government demonstrated, we can take a muscular approach. We introduced the extensive sanctions regime to disrupt Iran's hostile behaviour, targeting its decision makers along with those who did its bidding. We imposed measures to help choke off the funding flows from Iran to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as well as sanctions on Iran's drone programme; indeed, 400 sanctions were in place on Iran by the time we left office, and in 2023 alone we made 154 new designations. Alongside the US and with support from allies, we carried out strikes against the Houthis in Yemen to degrade their capabilities, aiding and supporting allies across the world. British military personnel and equipment helped to defend Israel from an Iranian attack in April, and we told the regime in Tehran in no uncertain terms that it must rein in its proxies.

When the Government propose measures such as the regulations before the House to counter Iran's appalling behaviour, we will support them, but we are also very clear that the Government need to maintain the pressure and look at the bigger picture in equal measure to respond to the ever-growing threat. That point takes me on to the strategy that we are pursuing.

We must stop compartmentalising our response and approach to Iran. We need to work out how we will measure success in reducing the threat of Iran to our people and our interests. The Government must do this work. Iran does not currently pursue active and direct confrontation with us, but its threshold for chaos is too high. We must work out how we will reduce that threat. Iran will continue to do as it sees fit—its priority is the survival of the regime, and it has strategic patience—but we need to shape a strategy not in response to Iran, but in the pursuit of our ambitions, protecting our people and our interests. Unfortunately, we cannot rely on the USA to lead. We need a new Euro-Atlantic focus, but the UK must decide what our priorities are.

We must also be prepared for fractures within the regime. We must recognise that although Iran rarely changes its behaviour, it has a cycle of boom and bust and we must be prepared for what may fall out. I urge the Minister to take the opportunity to restructure; I recognise that he is the Minister for sanctions rather than for north Africa, but I know that he will take these words back to the Department. It is time for us to rethink our strategy on Iran and move from being reactive to being proactive.

We need long-term thinking on how we restore state control over areas abused by Iranian-backed non-state actors. That includes the implementation of UN resolution 1701 and the removal of Hezbollah military positions from southern Lebanon, with the Lebanese military being able to reassert sovereign control. We also need a strategic approach to the Houthis that prioritises the restoration of proper governance in Yemen, including payment to public servants and protections against Houthi embezzlement of public funds.

Domestically, we must bolster our resilience and protect our society from corrosive Iranian influence and transnational repression, which is extensive. The National Security Act 2023 should be implemented in full as quickly as possible, including the register of foreign lobbyists, which shamefully the Government have delayed. I urge them to put it in place as soon as possible. There is no reason for it not to proceed at speed.

Internationally, we must work with our partners to contain the looming threat of a nuclear Iran. The joint comprehensive plan of action needs revisiting. There is no perfect deal, but the current situation is untenable. The JCPOA is on life support. We need a new Euro-Atlantic approach. Antony Blinken's comment that Iran's nuclear break-out time is now one to two weeks should concern us all. It is a nuclear threshold state. We have the agency to disrupt Iran's malign plans and to lead the international community in doing so if we have the courage to act and are prepared to develop a harder edge. The time to act must be now.

I will be grateful if the Minister answers the following questions. When will the Government proscribe the IRGC? That was a promise that Labour made in opposition, and promises matter. Will he work with allies to ensure that sanctions are international and ensure their effectiveness in curbing Iranian drone development exports? Individual sanctions programmes do not work; they must be done on a multilateral basis.

Will the Minister work to ensure that the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation is pursuing penalties against those who breach sanctions? We have not seen any being pursued when there have been breaches of sanctions around Russia. We must see that happening on both Iran and Russia. Does he agree that in addition to using sanctions, we must buttress Ukraine's military capability requirements so that it can take down Iranian drones in the skies and match the weapon range of Russia's armed forces? That means the use of Storm Shadow missiles.

Finally, with proxies such as Hezbollah being degraded, will the Minister commit to working towards freeing captured societies from Iranian influence and helping states such as Lebanon to reassert their independence and state effectiveness? Will he assert in clear terms that the Government condemn all Iranian proxies and will assist good-faith actors in resisting their proliferation, political entrenchment and military expansion and pursue

[Alicia Kearns]

a new UK coherent strategy to protect our people, our country and our interests from an increasingly belligerent Iran?

The Government's message to Iran at all times must be that its threshold for chaos is too high. They must step back, because the current approach is not working, but that starts with us recognising that we can be in the driving seat and stop reacting to Iran.

5.24 pm

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his speech on this really important issue. The continued instability in the region is of growing concern to many of us, not just because of the immense loss of life but because of the ever-growing security risk for this country. The Government have been clearly leading calls for de-escalation in the region. Does the Minister agree that it is time once again to redouble our efforts with those calls, so that all parties in the region show restraint?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

5.25 pm

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I appreciate your earlier guidance and apologise to you and the House.

I rise to speak on behalf of my party in support of today's measures. The Liberal Democrats have for a long time supported a strengthening of UK sanctions against the Iranian regime, not least in the light of the murder of Mahsa Amini just over two years ago. After Mahsa's brutal murder by the Iranian morality police, Iranians took to the streets in their hundreds of thousands. Violence was meted out by the Iranian authorities against those brave individuals. More than 20,000 were detained, with women and girls particularly targeted, and ultimately some were executed by the Iranian authorities.

Such behaviour is characteristic of the Iranian regime. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's own human rights and democracy report, in its most recent iteration, labels Iran as one of the worst executors globally. More than 500 people were executed in 2022, including two young offenders. The report also identifies the continued erosion and systematic violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression and belief, the tightening of restrictions against women and girls and, chillingly, the use of facial recognition software to identify those deemed to be improperly dressed.

Just as the Iranian regime sees fit to violate the basic rights of its own citizens at home, its influence abroad is similarly malign, both in the middle east and closer to home. It is Iranian drones—more than 8,000 of them—that have come to Vladimir Putin's aid and been launched continually into Ukraine since the start of the war. We supported the strong condemnation by the UK and our E3 partners of the news that Iranian ballistic missiles were also now being exported to Russia for use against our Ukrainian allies.

To that end, we welcome today's sanctions, which extend existing sanctions against UAVs to other goods and technology of strategic concern, from cameras designed for UAVs to microwave amplifiers. We trust that the Minister will keep the list under continual review,

not least to ensure that we are preventing the future supply of anything that Russia might seek to procure from the Iranians. Will he update the House on what discussions he or his colleagues have had with E3 counterparts or others regarding the status of the JCPOA? What is the Government's stance on the JCPOA, given Iran's seeming disregard for international law?

The Liberal Democrats also urge the Government to go further on sanctions. The past few weeks have served as a demonstration of Iran's terrible influence within the middle east, and in particular the role of the IRGC. We condemn the barrage of ballistic missiles fired against Israel by Iran's IRGC at the beginning of the month. The IRGC continues to supply rockets and weaponry to its terrorist proxies, Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, who have caused so much death and misery in the middle east. In 2022, security services revealed 10 plots organised by the IRGC in that year alone here on British soil where the intention was to kidnap or kill British nationals or UK residents.

The previous Conservative Government did not proscribe the IRGC. In opposition, the now Foreign Secretary said:

"The IRGC is behaving like a terrorist organisation and must now be proscribed as such."

I agree, so will the Minister take that long overdue step and proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist organisation? Not only will that have a positive impact in the region, but it will make the Iranian diaspora in the UK safer and more secure. I am sure that Members on both sides of the House have British-Iranian constituents who are deeply concerned about how the IRGC has been able to operate with limited constraints in this country. We welcome any steps forward to strengthen our sanctions regime against Iran, but we will continue to make the case to the Government that the single most effective thing that they can do is proscribe the IRGC.

I have two remaining points. Recalling the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who is thankfully now back in the UK with her family following the six years that she spent in prison in Iran, the Labour party committed in its manifesto to introducing a right to consular assistance in cases of human rights violations—a measure that we support. I raised yesterday the case of British-Egyptian dual national Alaa Abd El-Fattah, who is being held without consular access in Egypt. Will the Minister update the House on when the right to consular assistance will be introduced?

Alicia Kearns: I would be interested in hearing what difference the hon. Gentleman thinks proscription of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps would make. On Alaa Abd El-Fattah, the problem is that the Egyptians do not recognise dual nationality, so a right to consular access would make no fundamental difference. Having led an inquiry on this, I would be grateful if he explained why he thinks a right to consular access would make a fundamental difference in any such hostage case.

Calum Miller: On the IRGC, we believe that proscribing that terrorist organisation, which runs a state in the region, would put considerable constraints on its ability to operate around the world and prohibit many of its actions, including those in the UK and threats against British citizens, to which I referred. I know that the hon. Lady has taken a strong interest in the case that I mentioned—indeed, she mentioned it in the House

yesterday—and is also working on the denial of consular access. It seems to me that consular access is a critical role of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. In the case that we are discussing, it is not clear to the family of Alaa Abd El-Fattah that the Foreign Office has made sufficient effort to secure that access in Egypt, and it is in that context that I raise this particular question. I would be interested in the Minister's response on when consular assistance will be guaranteed to those who have suffered human rights violations.

Secondly, as we use sanctions against those with links to the Iranian regime, we urge the Government to look closely at where those individuals, and others with links to the regime, have stashed their money. Has some of that money been funnelled into London, as is the case with so many other kleptocratic regimes, and will the Minister commit to carrying out an audit so that we know where those assets are—including those that have been entrusted in the name of family members—and can freeze them accordingly? I hope that the Minister will update the House on whether the Government are considering any plans for a third piece of economic crime legislation to close loopholes in the two previous Acts, including by finally delivering a comprehensive approach to the register of beneficial ownership.

Finally, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) has set out how, in this Parliament, the Liberal Democrats will act as a constructive Opposition. This is my first contribution to a debate on legislation as the party's foreign affairs spokesperson, so I put on record that that approach applies as much to the international sphere as it does to domestic policy. We welcomed only yesterday the Government's measures on using frozen Russian assets to the benefit of Ukraine, which we had called for over many months. We also urge the Government to go further by seizing those assets in their entirety. It is in that constructive spirit that I put forward my party's proposals for taking further steps on Iran. In that area, too, I urge the new Government to be ahead of events, not behind them.

5.33 pm

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, which I welcome both for its steadfast support of Ukraine and for its action on Iran.

As we have heard from everyone in the debate, Iran poses a threat to both regional and global stability. The Iranian regime is not just exporting weapons to support Russia's despicable illegal war in Ukraine; it is exporting terror—we have heard mention of the Houthis and various other groups. It is—and I thank the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) for mentioning this—committing savage repression against its own people. Over 230 people have been executed in Iran in the past few months alone, and I know that the Iranian community in Hendon is incredibly worried about the horrific repression that the Iranian people face.

We know that Iran poses a threat, and we know that that threat is growing, so I welcome the cross-party consensus that the measures make real sense. I thank the Minister for introducing the regulations, and I ask that the FCDO keep a close eye on the threat that Iran poses so that we can take further measures if needed, to back up the Government's strong action to confront the threat of Iran head on.

5.34 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I strongly welcome the regulations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) and the Minister have made clear, Iran is a malign influence that is fuelling many of the most serious conflicts around the world. There was Iran's horrendous attack on Israel recently, but there has also been its supply of weapons to Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis—and particularly to Russia, in its invasion of Ukraine.

We have debated Ukraine many times, and will continue to do so. The Minister has taken a close interest in the issue, and I thank him for his support in opposition—both sides of the House are united in support for Ukraine. The measures will help a little, but the Minister will know that Ukraine is suffering desperately. The casualties, which are being inflicted in part by the weapons that, hopefully, this measure will help to stop reaching Russia, are horrendous, and stopping those attacks is part of President Zelensky's victory plan. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford that we need to do more to support Ukraine to implement its victory plan, particularly by allowing it not only to shoot down attacks from drones and missiles over its own territory but to attack where they originate, outside the border of Ukraine in Russia.

It is not going to be enough just to stop the supply of weapons from Iran. We know that they are being supplied by other countries, in particular North Korea—and not just weapons, but potentially troops as well. Therefore, I hope that we will look at sanctions enforcement across all the countries that are giving succour to Russia.

I want to touch on one or two other aspects of Iranian behaviour. The Minister knows that sanctions are used to try to put an economic squeeze on countries that have breached international rules, and also to uphold human rights. In particular, the use of Magnitsky sanctions is now well established.

The Minister may be aware that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom. Iran's record in that area is terrible: it is 176th out of 180 on the index of press freedom. As RSF—Reporters Without Borders—has pointed out, more than 100 journalists have been interrogated, detained or imprisoned since the start of the protest movement in 2022; 16 remain in prison due to their work, alongside another 19 who were there before.

We are not just talking about within Iran; the Minister will know that the IRGC lies behind the attacks on journalists in London. Iran International has had to have protection and move offices because of a continuing threat by the IRGC against its journalists. I have talked to the management of Iran International and some of its very brave journalists, one of whom was attacked in the streets of London. We are not just talking about Iran International, either. Members of the BBC Persian service continue to be subject to threats and harassment, and their families in Iran are being pressured by the regime to try to reach those journalists.

For those reasons, I echo the calls that have been made already by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford and the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller): the IRGC must be proscribed. That was the view of the

[Sir John Whittingdale]

Minister's colleagues when they were in opposition, and it is the view of America and Canada. We await to hear as soon as possible the Government's decision.

Imposing sanctions is clearly an important part of putting pressure on Iran, but they need to be enforced. One of the benefits of having professional investigative journalists is that they are sometimes able to expose things that otherwise remain hidden. If the Minister has not done so, will he study carefully this week's edition of *The Economist*? *The Economist* has carried out an in-depth investigation of the enforcement of the sanctions imposed by America on Iran, and the way in which those sanctions are being completely bypassed. Apparently, Iran is currently selling 1.8 million barrels of oil per day, almost all of which end up in China. They do so through a whole host of front organisations. Individual components of the Iranian regime, including the IRGC and the Quds Force, are given crude oil to market and they then set up their own front organisations. They use shadow organisations to procure tanker movements; they have banks that support that activity; and as I say, a large part of that oil ends up in China, which is the main purchaser. The money then flows back through that network directly to Iran.

Although I do not necessarily believe that that is done knowingly, *The Economist* also states:

"London is the world's sixth-biggest base by number of Iranian-linked entities blacklisted by America."

As such, I hope the Minister will look carefully at not just tightening the noose around the regime, but making sure that the loopholes that are currently being exploited to get around sanctions are properly closed down, in this country and elsewhere. As I have said, today's motion is very welcome, but we need to do a lot more.

5.41 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I welcome the opportunity not just to give my support to the proposal to continue and extend sanctions, but to put on record my condemnation of the Iranian regime and to give my support to the women and girls of Iran, who have been so brave in fighting for their rights in the face of brutal suppression. Sanctions imposed on Iran come as we see increased hostility by groups associated with Iran, or by Iran itself, at an international level. Most recently, Iran's two direct attacks on Israel this year, which the UK and western allies have condemned as escalatory actions in an already precarious situation, speak volumes about the threat that the regime represents.

One of the purposes of the UK's sanctions on Iran is to deter its Government, or an armed group backed by that Government, from conducting hostile activity against the UK or any other country. The removal of sanctions should come only when there is evidence that Iran has disengaged from that hostile activity, yet all we have seen is the opposite. Since May 2019, Iran has continued to violate the joint comprehensive plan of action implemented to limit the Iranian nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief. Furthermore, it is well known that Iran funds multiple groups across the middle east designated by the UK as terrorist organisations. Those proxies act to destabilise the region as a whole, but Iran's activities are not limited to the middle east.

As has been said in the Chamber already, there have been a number of threats to individuals in the UK emanating from Iran, and as the Minister outlined, it is now providing extensive support for the illegal war in Ukraine—both military and logistical—which is impacting directly on the lives of brave Ukrainian soldiers seeking to defend their country.

As I said at the start of my speech, Iran's terrorist actions sadly extend to its own people. We know that Iran's people currently live under a violent, oppressive regime. In September 2022, Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian-Kurdish woman, was arrested by Iran's morality police for allegedly not complying with the country's Islamic dress code. Three days later, she tragically died in police custody, sparking a wave of protests across Iran and drawing the attention of the international community. Despite Iranian officials claiming that Mahsa Amini died of natural causes, the widespread protests that followed were a clear response to years of repression, with demonstrators demanding justice, freedom and accountability. The bravery of these protesters cannot be overstated. The Iranian Government's heavy-handed response was brutal, with the UN fact-finding mission and Iran Human Rights reporting that over 550 protesters were killed by security forces. Those deaths represent the highest death toll seen in any protests since the Islamic Republic's founding in 1979, and are a stark reminder of the dangers faced by those who dare to voice dissent.

Sadly, the plight of women in Iran is not limited to the enforcement of hijab laws, but extends to many aspects of daily life, rooted in systemic discrimination that is codified in law. The situation becomes even more alarming when we consider the lack of protection against domestic violence. Iran currently has no law to safeguard women from abuse or femicide, and between March 2021 and June 2023, at least 165 women were killed by male family members in honour killings. That remains an ongoing and disturbing tragedy.

I am also deeply concerned by Iran's treatment of followers of the Baha'i faith, which the UN has referred to as

"the most egregious forms of repression, persecution and victimisation."

In February 2022, Iranian authorities allowed only recognised religions to be stated on the new national ID card. In doing so, they deprived unrecognised religious minorities of access to many basic services. Without that ID, Iranian nationals are unable to obtain credit cards, driver's licences or passports; nor can they buy property, cash cheques or apply for loans. That is clear evidence of serious discrimination against minority groups.

I am proud that, at the 78th UN General Assembly under the last Government, the UK co-sponsored the Iran human rights resolution calling for Iran to eliminate in law and in practice all forms of discrimination on the basis of thought, conscience, religion or belief. Although that was a strong message from international partners, it fell on deaf ears, but the UK Government, alongside allies such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, have made their stance clear.

In September, our Foreign Secretary called on the Iranian Government to end human rights abuses and to cease the use of force to impose the hijab. We should continue to press the Iranian regime to respect the

rights of its citizens, and we remain committed to holding it to account for violations through sanctions and international pressure. We must not turn a blind eye to human rights abuses in Iran. We stand in solidarity with the Iranian people, especially the women and other minority groups who are leading the fight for dignity, equality and justice.

Our sanctions regime is an important part of how we stand up for our values and for the victims of the Iranian regime both in Iran and abroad, and I enthusiastically support the motion securing their continuation and expansion.

5.46 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): Like all other Members, I rise in support of these important regulations. They of course expand existing sanctions, targeting additional goods and technology related to the Iranian military development and Iran's production of unmanned aerial vehicles and missiles.

In recent weeks we have all seen not only that Iran has launched yet a further unprecedented missile attack on Israel, which has rightly attracted universal condemnation, but that the UK Government have announced further aid to Ukraine in its struggle against Russian aggression. As we all know, Russia's war effort and its breaches of international humanitarian law are supported by the supply of Iranian UAVs and missiles. I agree with those who have spoken that Iran, in both instances, through its supply of UAVs and missiles to various states and non-state terrorist organisations, is prolonging the war in Ukraine and risking the further escalation of conflicts in the middle east.

In a speech to the UN Security Council last month, the Foreign Secretary rightly emphasised the importance of upholding a rules-based international order, especially international humanitarian law. In both those respects, I am sure we can all agree that Iran is a destabilising influence in the region and further afield. As we have heard said so eloquently by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), it also runs a very savage and repressive regime against Iranian civilians.

If we hope to see a more peaceful future, we must ensure that all nations adhere to international law and, where necessary, act to enforce such compliance. Sanctions such as those before us are very important tools that the international community can use to apply pressure on regimes, such as Iran's, that contravene international law. I am particularly pleased that the Minister outlined how the Government co-ordinated the efforts on these sanctions with international partners such as the European Union, the United States and Japan. It is clear that, if these are to be effective, there needs to be a co-ordinated effort across the globe.

Although I acknowledge that the Government have previously introduced a separate sanctions regime and financial sanctions to encourage Iran to comply with international human rights law, I think it is important to refer to the long-standing concerns about the state's atrocious human rights record. To echo the words of the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle, we will all be familiar with the Woman, Life, Freedom movement and the protests that followed the tragic death in custody of Mahsa Amini, who was arrested by the Iranian morality police for improperly wearing her hijab.

Amnesty International and others have noted grave human rights violations in Iran since these protests, including further suppression of the rights of freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and the intensification of the Iranian regime's crackdown on the rights of women and girls. Thousands were subjected to interrogation, arbitrary detention, unjust prosecution and imprisonment for peacefully exercising their human rights—rights that we take for granted in this country.

These are all reasons why we should take a firm approach to any contravention of international law by the Iranian regime, and I would welcome the Minister's assurances that the Government continue to monitor the effectiveness of sanctions introduced to encourage the Iranian regime to comply with international humanitarian law.

In returning to the dreadful consequences of Iran's supply of UAVs and missiles to various states and non-state actors across the world, we should also bear in mind that sanctions can form only part of any strategy. As the United Nations stated:

"Sanctions do not operate, succeed or fail in a vacuum. The measures are most effective at maintaining or restoring international peace and security when applied as part of a comprehensive strategy encompassing peacekeeping, peacebuilding and peacemaking."

The sanctions must therefore fit into a wider approach that the UK takes towards the situation in the middle east, where we also support de-escalation and peacebuilding initiatives as they arise. We must be firm and fair. Where there are opportunities for de-escalation, we must take them, while remaining steadfast in our support of international law and preparedness to sanction states such as Iran that act to undermine it.

5.50 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I welcome today's motion to approve Iranian sanctions; it marks an essential and targeted response to Iran's growing military threat. By expanding sanctions to cover these additional goods and technology, particularly those contributing to Iran's UAVs and missiles, we are striking at the core of Iran's military-industrial complex. That is crucial in disrupting Iran's capability to continue not just fuelling conflicts in the middle east, but aiding Russia's war against Ukraine.

Russia's recent desperate procurement of weapons from North Korea shows that Russia is struggling. By cutting off Iran's support, we further tighten the pressure on Russia's war machine, limiting the lifeline that Iran provides and squeezing their ability to continue the brutal conflict in Ukraine.

Since August 2022, Iran has supplied Russia with hundreds of Shahed-136 drones, which have been used extensively to target Ukrainian civilians and infrastructure. Last month, the US confirmed that Iran had transferred shipments of Fath-360 ballistic missiles to Russia. Those missiles, with a range of 75 miles, allow Russian forces to conserve their more advanced long-range missiles for other strategic targets. The Fath-360 missiles will undoubtedly be employed within weeks, which I fear could lead to more civilian casualties in Ukraine.

Russia has already deployed Iranian drones to strike critical infrastructure, and the missiles that are being transferred will clearly have a similar role. Dozens of

[Richard Foord]

Russian personnel have been trained in Iran to use these systems, deepening the co-operation between the two regimes.

Iran has already shown us its character by striking at the heart of the UK. As we heard from the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), the March attack on the Iranian journalist Pouria Zeraati is a stark reminder of the growing threat posed by the Iranian regime to the UK. Over the past 18 months, Iranian journalists in the UK have been under sustained threat from the IRGC, which has targeted reporters and their families in an attempt to silence critical voices. We cannot allow a regime that silences its critics with violence and fear to intimidate those who seek to expose the truth here in the UK.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I really wanted to be here for this debate, but I would have had to be in two places at the same time and I can be in only one, so I apologise for that, Madam Deputy Speaker. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I want to put the following on the record. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the suppression of human rights, the persecution of Christians, Shi'as and Baha'is, and the denial of education, jobs and the right even to have a life puts Iran in one of the four top countries in the world where the right to live is suppressed to such levels?

Richard Foord: I am grateful to the hon. Member for pointing that out; he is absolutely right. Not only is there no tolerance for alternative views or beliefs, but Iran was mentioned in the FCDO human rights report in 2022, and on the basis of that report the Liberal Democrats called—and have done for years—for us to withhold arms licences to Iran, most obviously, and also to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Our stance on the export of arms to the region is of long standing and very much in line with the human rights report produced by the FCDO in 2022.

We need to take stronger action on Iranian assets here within the UK. We call for the wider use of Magnitsky sanctions. We should specifically target the relatives of sanctioned individuals who have transferred wealth in order to avoid the measures. In the past few weeks we have witnessed just how easy it is to dodge sanctions on Russian oil. We must cut off those financially supporting Iran from London, blocking their access to the world's second-largest financial hub. That will help stop the flow of dirty money and ensure that those who support Iran's military operations directly or indirectly are punished.

I will draw to a close. Will the Minister comment in his summing up on whether the Government will continue to monitor the export of some of the goods we are talking about today, in particular to states that neighbour Iran? With the sanctions imposed on Russia, we have seen a subsequent uptick in the export of machine tools, for example, to some of the states that surround Russia. Will the UK monitor that? We stand ready to support any further steps that will limit Iran's capacity to cause harm in the middle east and Ukraine. In the face of Iran's continued support for Russia's brutal war, these sanctions send a clear message. We must keep up the pressure and not let up until Iran's threats to global security diminishes.

5.56 pm

Stephen Doughty: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. They have made some important points, and I thank them for their wholehearted support for the regulations. It is important that we maintain unity in the House on these measures to tackle these regimes, whether it be Russia or Iran. As I said earlier, these measures represent a step forward in our capability to restrict Iran's proliferation of advanced conventional weapons, which continue to fuel the conflict we have been discussing in the middle east and to support Russia in its illegal war in Ukraine. We are firmly committed to using sanctions to hold the Iranian regime to account for its malign activities in the UK and elsewhere.

I should point out that we do not just have these regulations. Continuing on from measures under the previous Administration, on 2 September we sanctioned four IRGC Quds Force targets who have a role supporting Iranian proxy actions in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. We announced sanctions against 15 Iranian and Russian targets on 10 September, cancelled our bilateral air service arrangements with Iran Air and targeted those who were involved in a series of actions.

We have consistently raised our concerns directly with the Iranian regime and, indeed, with a range of partners. On 14 October we designated nine individuals and entities involved in facilitating Iran's destabilising activity. That included senior military and IRGC figures and entities involved in Iran's ballistic missile programme. Those are just some of the examples since this Government came in, but they are among more than 460 Iranian individuals and entities that have been sanctioned due to Iran's malign activities in the region and internationally. That includes 94 human rights-specific sanctions on individuals and entities, to respond to many of the significant and rightful concerns raised by colleagues today.

Alicia Kearns: It is clear from the tenor of the House—I have to say as a woman that I find it incredibly moving to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) and the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) speaking so strongly for the women who continue to be raped and blinded by the Iranian regime—that the House is saying that we want to see more effort on this. I would be grateful if the Minister committed to taking that away. I am not asking for him to predetermine what he will do on sanctions, but it is incredibly powerful to hear so many men speaking up for Iranian women, and they need to hear our voices or they will lose hope.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady's comments. As she knows, we do not comment on future designations, but I have certainly heard the strong voice across the House today, which reflects the horrific reality for women and girls—ordinary Iranian civilians—under that repressive regime. I thank her overall for her support. She rightly highlighted a series of Iran's malign actions. I agree with her that those promoting proscribed organisations in the UK should face the full force of the law. That is for our law enforcement agencies, but the Prime Minister and others have made that absolutely clear.

The hon. Lady raised concerns in relation to the foreign influence registration scheme. I assure her that we remain absolutely committed to that. We will further strengthen our national security while maintaining the UK as an international hub for business. Announcements on the tiers will be made at a later stage, but we are absolutely committed to it—it is not going anywhere. We are committed to moving forward with that agenda and I have been discussing it with colleagues across government.

The hon. Lady and others mentioned the JCPOA. Let me be clear: snapback remains an option. We remain in close contact with E3 and other partners, and I will say a little more on that in a moment. I refer her to my previous comments on the IRGC as a whole. She and other hon. Members asked me about the internationalisation of sanctions. Absolutely, this is about working with partners. Are we looking at how we can increase penalties and enforcement? Absolutely, whether that be OTSI or others. Obviously, I cannot comment on future investigations and designations.

The hon. Lady asked about wider UK military support to Ukraine. I point to the very important announcement yesterday, on top of existing commitments. The extraordinary revenue acceleration will deliver an additional £2.26 billion to Ukraine for crucial needs, working with our partners across the G7. I will come on to Lebanon in a moment, but do I condemn all the proxies that Iran is supporting? Absolutely. We have been very clear about that.

Other right hon. and hon. Members made important points. My hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Nesil Caliskan) and the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), rightly referred to issues around human rights and repressive actions within Iran itself. He asked specifically about one case. I know he received a specific answer from the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Hamish Falconer) on that yesterday in FCDO questions. He asked about the wider issues around illicit finance and kleptocracy. These are significant priorities for the Foreign Secretary and me. I assure him and the House that we are working at pace on these issues and will be announcing further measures in due course. He asked about public registers of beneficial ownership and ensuring transparency. I am in close contact with our overseas territories regarding these issues and have made it clear that we expect to see progress at pace. I will make that clear to leaders before the joint ministerial council in a few weeks' time. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) rightly referred to the heinous executions and internal repression, although, as I said, I will not comment on further designations.

I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for his kind remarks about the cross-party support we have had for Ukraine. He rightly raised issues relating to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. He will have heard in recent days the Foreign Secretary, with his counterpart in the Republic of Korea, state our absolute condemnation regarding DPRK's involvement in Russia's illegal war in Ukraine. I will certainly take a look at The Economist article he mentioned. We will seek to do everything we can to close down loopholes and ensure the effectiveness of our regime.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) made some very powerful points, in particular highlighting the impact on women and girls, and minority groups—that was also touched on by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—within Iran. The Government remain absolutely committed to freedom of religion or belief, and targeting religious minorities or repressive actions against them cannot be tolerated.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) also highlighted the internal oppression. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) ranged over a whole series of issues, but spoke in particular about third-country circumvention. Addressing this issue is a key priority for the Government. It is one that forms a regular part of my conversations with third countries identified. I have had numerous such conversations in recent weeks and we will, with our allies, continue to do so. We must close down all loopholes and all routes, whether in Russia or Iran, to ensure our sanctions regimes are effective.

Before concluding, let me briefly touch on a couple of the specific themes that came out of the debate. Let me be clear: Iran's actions in relation to Israel are completely unacceptable. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have been absolutely clear that we stand with Israel and recognise its right to self-defence in the face of Iranian aggression. We absolutely condemn in the strongest terms its attack against Israel. We designated individuals specifically in response to the attack on Israel, including senior military figures and entities involved in Iran's ballistic missile programme.

I referred to the JCPOA, but let me be clear that Iran's nuclear escalation since 2019 has gone far beyond JCPOA limits and is undermining the deal. Alongside our E3 partners, we will use all diplomatic options available to ensure that Iran never develops a nuclear weapon, including triggering the snapback of all UN sanctions lifted under the JCPOA if necessary. I mentioned the actions that we have taken against regional proxies, but let me remind the House that the UK proscribes the entirety of Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, and has an asset freeze in place against the entire organisation. We assess Hamas in their entirety to be concerned with terrorism, and therefore proscribe the organisation in full. The Houthis are sanctioned in their entirety by the UK and are subject to a targeted arms embargo.

On human rights, as I said, there are 94 human rights sanctions on Iranian individuals and entities. The horrifically high rate of executions is a deliberate attempt to instil fear and stifle dissent in Iran. As a Government we remain opposed to the death penalty in all circumstances, as a matter of principle. The situation for women and girls is truly horrific. We condemn Iran's appalling treatment of women and girls, including through its repressive policies. We will work with international partners to engage with the findings of the UN special rapporteur on Iranian human rights.

Media freedoms were also mentioned; as a member of the Media Freedom Coalition, we are determined to ensure that journalists are able to do their jobs without fear of retribution. Given the situation for detainees and the historical cases involving Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and others, we continue to believe that British nationals and British-Iranian dual nationals are at significant risk of detention in Iran. British nationals are advised not to travel to Iran, but we do not and never will accept our nationals being used as diplomatic leverage.

Jim Shannon: Again, I apologise for not being here earlier to ask the Minister a question directly. The IRGC is quite clearly the leader of Iran's private army. It is involved in some of the worst repression, murders and despicable acts across all of Iran. Is it not time to collate all this information and put it together to hold those people accountable for what they are doing, and for human rights abuses in Iran?

Stephen Doughty: I made clear our position on the IRGC earlier, but as I pointed out, we have sanctioned directly a number of individuals involved with that organisation. We recognise the threat that it poses and will take the necessary measures to counter it at home and around the world, but obviously we do not comment on future designations.

The safety and security of the United Kingdom from Iran's malign actions has been raised on a number of occasions. It was rightly pointed out that the UK has identified at least 15 threats towards UK-based individuals. Our police, intelligence and security agencies have been confronting these threats for many years, but their seriousness has increased in recent months. Let me be clear: we will always stand up to threats from foreign nations, and we will continue to work closely with our international partners to identify, deter, and respond to those threats.

Lastly, on Lebanon, we have been very clear that a political solution consistent with resolution 1701 is the only way to restore its sovereignty, territorial integrity and stability. We have been calling for an immediate ceasefire between Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel, and a political plan that will enable civilians on both sides to return to their homes. Nobody wants further escalation, and we will continue to work with partners across the region on that.

These new regulations will increase the pressure on Iran's defence industry. They will disrupt Iran's production of UAVs and missiles that could be supplied to proxies in the middle east or Russia. We will continue to work with likeminded partners. The regulations send a clear message to the Government of Iran and those seeking to harm the UK's security and that of our partners: we will not stand idle in the face of this aggression. I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Iran (Sanctions) (Amendment) Regulations 2024 (SI, 2024, No. 944), dated 11 September 2024, a copy of which was laid before this House on 12 September, be approved.

Independent Expert Panel

[Relevant document: House of Commons Commission, Independent Expert Panel: nomination of candidates, HC 282.]

6.9 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I beg to move,

That, in accordance with Standing Order No. 150C (Appointment of Independent Expert Panel Chair and Members) and for a period of 6 years from 25 November 2024:

(1) Sir Adrian Fulford be appointed as Chair of the Independent Expert Panel; and

(2) Lyndsey de Mestre, Andrew Hoyle and Wendy Williams CBE be appointed as members of the Independent Expert Panel.

The motion, which stands in my name, nominates a new Chair and three new members of the Independent Expert Panel. The IEP was established in 2020 to hear appeals and determine sanctions in bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct complaints against current and former MPs. In 2022 the IEP's remit was expanded to include hearing appeals from the Committee on Standards. The IEP has eight members, appointed following fair and open competition. The Commission's report of 9 October sets out the details of the recruitment process. In 2020 the House appointed four members for a four-year term, and four for six years. We are therefore appointing four new members today, to join the four existing members whose terms expire in 2026.

Before turning to the new members, I would like to thank the outgoing Chair, Sir Stephen Irwin, and the outgoing members, Lisa Ball, Johanna Higgins and Clare McGlynn, for their service to the House. With their colleagues, and under Sir Stephen's leadership, they have created—from scratch—a body that I know is widely respected across the House for its rigour, fairness and independence. Sir Stephen will be especially greatly missed by those who have worked closely with him for his wise counsel, generosity, and commitment to changing the culture in this place for the better.

A measure of the esteem in which the IEP is now held is the quality of the candidates that it has attracted to join it. The nominee for Chair, Sir Adrian Fulford, had a long and distinguished judicial career culminating as vice-president of the Court of Appeal criminal division, as well as being the first Investigatory Powers Commissioner and being elected to the International Criminal Court in 2003. Many in the House will know Wendy Williams CBE from her review of the Windrush scandal, but she also brings her experience as one of His Majesty's inspectors of constabulary and fire & rescue services. Lyndsey de Mestre KC has extensive experience in chairing professional disciplinary panels covering the clergy, police and the Bar as well as being the Chancellor for the dioceses of York and St Albans. Dr Andrew Hoyle is currently an assistant director in fitness to practise at the General Medical Council.

In combination with the continuing members of the panel, these appointments will ensure that the IEP continues to have the range of skills and experience to ensure that the House and parliamentary community can have confidence in its rigour, independence and fairness. I hope that Members will support the motion, and I commend it to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Leader of the House.

6.12 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I will not detain the House long, Members will be delighted and relieved to hear—I can see that is a popular position. I simply echo the sentiments that the Leader of the House expressed. The Independent Expert Panel obviously plays an extremely important role in scrutinising allegations of misconduct, and it is right that there is an independent mechanism to do that, free from political interference.

I add my thanks to the thanks that the Leader of the House has expressed already to the outgoing members, and in particular to Sir Stephen, the inaugural Chair of the IEP. I add my commendation for the newly nominated members. As the Leader of the House has said, Sir Adrian Fulford is an extremely distinguished, very senior member of the judiciary, and the other three members being appointed have extremely impressive professional and legal backgrounds as well.

I particularly add my endorsement to Wendy Williams, who I worked with at the Home Office when I was Minister of State for Police and Crime and she was one of His Majesty's inspectors of constabulary and fire & rescue services. She certainly discharged those duties with great effectiveness, as I saw during my time as a Minister in that Department. I am only too pleased to endorse the remarks that the Leader of the House has made.

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That, in accordance with Standing Order No. 150C (Appointment of Independent Expert Panel Chair and Members) and for a period of 6 years from 25 November 2024:

(1) Sir Adrian Fulford be appointed as Chair of the Independent Expert Panel; and

(2) Lyndsey de Mestre, Andrew Hoyle and Wendy Williams CBE be appointed as members of the Independent Expert Panel.

Voting by Proxy

6.14 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I beg to move,

That, for the remainder of the current session of Parliament, the following amendment to Standing Order No. 39A shall have effect:

In paragraph (2), insert “(d) serious long-term illness or injury;”.

Under the Standing Order, Members are currently eligible for a proxy vote in the event of childbirth, care of an infant or newly adopted child, complications related to childbirth, miscarriage or baby loss, or risk-based exclusion from the parliamentary estate. However, the temporary arrangements related to proxy votes for Members suffering from long-term or serious illness expired at the end of the last Parliament. I therefore tabled this motion to reinstate eligibility for proxy votes to Members with long-term illness or injury until the end of the current Session.

Permanent changes to the rules governing the House must be introduced with due care, and it is important for us to ensure that the right balance is struck. Before asking the House to consider making these arrangements permanent, I have asked the new Chair of the Procedure Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith), to provide recommendations on the operation of the proxy voting scheme.

I hope that Members will support the motion, and I commend it to the House.

6.15 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Once again, I find myself in agreement with the Leader of the House on the substance of this issue. Perhaps it will become a habit; I do not know.

The Opposition support the intention behind the motion. Clearly, if a Member of Parliament has a serious long-term illness or injury, it is reasonable that that Member can still exercise his or her vote even if absent. However, I should like to know how the threshold will be defined. Who decides whether a particular Member has or has not met the threshold, and what sort of evidence will be required? Might it be, for instance, a doctor's certificate? That may be the kind of question that the Procedure Committee will answer.

I should be interested to know the thoughts of the Leader of the House on those specific practical questions, but in principle we support this change.

6.16 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I shall not detain the House for long.

I welcome the motion. The House proved itself when Members were experiencing adverse circumstances because of covid and all the associated problems: it stepped up and made sure that Members had the opportunity that they ought to have to use their franchise. It is only right that, in a new Session, this arrangement should be extended for a five-year period. I think we should be demonstrating that ours is a kind workplace, and I think what the Leader of the House said has shown that it is. Some of us are bound to be under pressure sometimes, whatever that pressure may be, and it is good to know that we can go and have a chat with someone who can help us to get through the process. The House enables us to do that, and I commend what the Leader of the House has done.

6.17 pm

Lucy Powell: I thank the shadow Leader of the House for his comments and, as ever, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his attendance and his contribution. I echo what the hon. Gentleman said about the need for us to be considerate and caring, and to allow Members, when they absolutely cannot be here, to continue to represent their constituents by having their votes counted. That is an important principle, which the proxy voting scheme was designed to implement.

The shadow Leader of the House asked some important questions about issues that I have, in fact, asked the Chair of the Procedure Committee to consider further. Requiring notes from consultant-level doctors about reasons for absence is fairly onerous. There are certain illnesses that fall into the category, and questions have been raised in the past by Members and others about how some of those decisions have been reached, so I think it important that we maintain this option. I certainly did not want a situation where a Member undergoing treatment for cancer, for example, was unable to apply for a proxy vote.

I think it right for the Procedure Committee to consider exactly how this should be delivered in the long term, and permanently, to ensure that in circumstances when we would all feel it fair for someone to be eligible for a proxy vote, that person is given one, and that in circumstances when many of us would feel it a stretch for someone to be given a proxy vote, they do not get it. I think we need a short review of the arrangements to ensure that we proceed with confidence and on a permanent basis.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 15 May, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Andrew Gwynne.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

NatWest bank closure in Angel Edmonton

6.20 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition concerning the closure of the NatWest Angel Edmonton branch. The closure will significantly impact the local economy as many businesses have relied on its services for years. Additionally, it will further marginalise those who are digitally excluded. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take action to protect face-to-face banking services, halt the decline of bank branches and ensure banking services remain accessible to all.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Edmonton and Winchmore Hill

Declares that petitioners have significant concerns about the proposed closure of the NatWest branch in Angel Edmonton and its impact on reducing access to face-to-face banking services locally and leaving workers at risk of redundancy; notes that the Government is a significant stakeholder in NatWest; further notes that the closure of bank branches especially impacts older and disables people, those who are digitally excluded without access to internet banking and small business owners; and further declares that this can make it harder for many people to manage their finances at a time when millions of families are already struggling to make ends meet.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to act to protect face-to-face person banking services, ensure that the decline in banks can be stopped and even reversed and that accessibility to banking services is kept accessible to all.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003012]

Antisocial Behaviour: Leyton and Wanstead

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Vicky Foxcroft.*)

6.21 pm

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I am grateful to have this opportunity to address the House on an issue of pressing concern in my constituency. Persistent and serious patterns of antisocial behaviour have a profound impact on communities. I will talk about the nature of these challenges, the admirable patience and resilience of my constituents in the face of these issues, the strong leadership demonstrated by our local council and police, and how the Government's plans will be instrumental in turning the tide.

At the outset, I want to express my gratitude to the Minister for her attention to these matters, her willingness to engage with me last week and her offer of a further meeting to give me confidence that we can make progress on some of the difficult issues that I will outline today. I must also take this moment to commend the exceptional leadership shown by Waltham Forest council leader Grace Williams, Kam Rai at Redbridge council, Superintendent Claire McCarthy and Chief Superintendent Dan Card. They are leading the charge in keeping these issues from becoming even more severe, and I am confident that with continued support we can make real progress.

The problems I am going to raise are the manifestation of 14 years of underinvestment in the police, the decimation of our council services, a funding model that does not recognise the disproportionate population growth in east London boroughs and a criminal justice system that is feeding people back into our communities without rehabilitation.

Turning to the specific challenges, it is essential to understand that antisocial behaviour is more than a series of isolated incidents. It is often concentrated in areas of deprivation and exclusion, such as the Avenue Road estate in Leytonstone. Here, we are seeing a tragic cycle of drug misuse, criminality and social breakdown that threatens to undermine the fabric of our community. Public spaces are being vandalised, bins are being set on fire, and needles and drug litter are being left where children can find them. Users are shooting up and smoking crack in full public view. They are forcing entry to use drugs in people's front gardens and communal hallways and stairways, where residents have to get past them. Residents are seeing drug users having sex in public spaces or lying unconscious. It is incredibly distressing, particularly for residents with young families. Public spaces, including parks and playgrounds, are becoming unsafe due to open drug use and vandalism. Despite these troubling conditions, the residents of these areas have shown incredible tolerance and dignity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, may I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate? He referred to public parks, playgrounds and main streets as places where antisocial behaviour takes place. It is taking place in my constituency and I want to add to this debate by saying what we did. We had community police officers on the street and we also have an organisation called Street Pastors; it is very active and it involves all the churches coming together voluntarily to try to engage

with those on the streets who might cause some of the antisocial behaviour. Those two objectives of more community police and more street pastors seems to have reduced the large number of antisocial behaviour issues in my constituency. I am trying to be helpful in this debate—I always try to be constructive—and hopefully that is something the hon. Gentleman will think about.

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As he will learn, a number of schemes have aimed to tackle antisocial behaviour in the community. However, the size of the problem tends to bubble up, and I will come on to that.

Residents who speak up for their right to live in peace in their own community face serious intimidation, harassment, verbal abuse and threats. Many have told me that they fear that violence will be next. It is vital that we recognise and appreciate their tolerance. It is not only that residents are enduring such problems; the viability of the estate itself is questionable, and the council's inability to regenerate the area contributes to their marginalisation. Their lack of opportunities further adds to the problem. Residents tolerate antisocial behaviour with remarkable respect and humility, and a sense of self-worth. However, their patience must not be mistaken for complacency or acceptance. They deserve solutions, and I hope the Minister will tell us how the Government's approach to tackling antisocial behaviour will provide the framework we need. I am sure that this is something on which the council will continue to actively engage with residents, including at the meeting later this month, so that I can communicate back to them.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. He is speaking very powerfully from his experience of deeply troubling issues in his constituency. Other MPs, including me, have experienced similar issues in our own constituencies, and I pay tribute to residents who endure terrible ASB problems. The Government are doing excellent work on this issue, and I look forward to much more action coming forward, such as the introduction of new orders, other powers and more police community support officers. My hon. Friend is right to point to the importance of residents working with local authorities and the police. May I commend the residents in Reading town centre who recently removed several tonnes of rubbish in a massive community clear-up, which is part of the work to tackle ASB in the area?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for his apposite intervention. People in both our constituencies have tolerated 14 years of failure, and 14 years of all our systems and services being significantly eroded. That is why it is imperative that the Minister explains to us how she will go about addressing the issues that are faced, and tolerated, by our constituents.

I know that the Minister will understand just how damaging these issues can be for our communities. When there is a sense that people are damaging others with impunity, fear and mistrust can escalate. I have met the ward officer teams locally, and they are aware of the problems and keen to support the residents affected, but no matter how attentive they are, the persistence of these issues erodes trust in the police, which is already in a bad way across many areas of London. The reality is that few residents attend the ward panels and raise their

[Mr Calvin Bailey]

voices, partly because they are afraid of being seen engaging with the police, and partly because they have little trust that effective action will be taken. Residents have told me that they now feel like drug users have taken over the territory. They are scared to go out at night and almost feel as though they are squatters and intruders, even in their own homes, estates and neighbourhoods.

I am pleased to support the Government's plans to place 13,000 more neighbourhood police and PCSOs on the streets as part of the neighbourhood policing guarantee. This will be a game changer for Leyton and Wanstead, where our overstretched resources have left communities feeling abandoned. The additional officers have a clear local mandate and will bring a much-needed visible presence to our streets, rebuilding trust and confidence in the police.

I also want to highlight the Government's proposed respect orders, which will be crucial in empowering the police to take stronger action against the persistent offenders who make life unbearable for the ordinary resident. By addressing the small groups of individuals responsible for much of the antisocial behaviour, we can restore public spaces and ensure that they are safe for families once again. I would therefore be grateful for any more light that the Minister can shed on the respect orders that the Secretary of State has rightly proposed.

In Leyton and Wanstead, we are already seeing positive examples of multi-agency working, including initiatives such as Project ADDER, which focuses on tackling antisocial drug-related crime in hotspot areas. It has been demonstrated that when resources are properly targeted, they can make a difference. Last year, there was an operation focused on the Grove Green area of my constituency. The data shows that it worked, with a steep and sustained 75% fall in drug-related reports in the hotspot area from the peak in the previous year. However, due to its apparent success, the operation was then wound down and the resources were reprioritised. Sadly, I believe that the groups of drug users and the criminals who supply them have not really gone away; they have dispersed to a somewhat larger area.

It may be reported that drug-related offending and ASB in Leyton and Wanstead have not yet increased back to where they were last year, but that is not how it feels to our residents. That is perhaps down to two factors. First, the multi-agency action that has been taken clearly dispersed the activities away from the hotspot around Grove Green to a range of smaller areas, particularly in south Leytonstone. Secondly, I fear that in some cases residents no longer believe that reporting will lead to a long-term solution. We have to change that, so I am engaging closely with all the affected agencies and residents' groups to try to rekindle the hope that solutions can be found. The success of initiatives such as Project ADDER shows that we are on the right track, but the work must be sustained. The long-term commitment of resources and multi-agency collaboration will be vital in breaking the cycle of addiction and criminality that traps individuals and destabilises communities.

I would also like to address the challenges that we face in reporting and responding to these issues. Too often, the distinction between antisocial behaviour and crime is blurred, leading to confusion about what should

be reported and to whom. It is a particular issue where organised criminal networks seem to be involved. Residents describe it as living like they are in "The Wire", because there is obvious co-ordination between drug users who know each other well. They report users posting lookouts on the streets and in upstairs windows to identify police and ASB teams and cover up the evidence before they can act.

As we know, these gangs do not just fuel addiction, self-destruction and antisocial behaviours. They are also involved in further crimes, including shoplifting, violent robberies and burglaries and the selling of stolen goods alongside the drugs. Residents are understandably cautious about making reports, fearing retaliation; some of our current reporting mechanisms inadvertently put them at risk. We must improve communication channels and ensure that reporting is safe and effective. I know that the Minister is committed to this. I would welcome any updates on how we can better support residents who want to help but fear the consequences.

We must also consider the impact of police abstractions on local communities. The significant amount of officer time diverted to central London for public order duties is placing immense pressure on our local services. In Waltham Forest alone, over 26,000 hours of officer time were unavailable in our neighbourhoods because of abstractions to aid with central policing duties. Whenever there is an abstraction, community response is the first thing to go, because 999 responses are rightly prioritised above all else. In some periods during the summer, some wards had no community response officers because the level of abstractions was so consistently high. Although I fully support the right to peaceful protest in a safe environment, the impact on local policing is unsustainable. I urge the Minister to review the system, especially as our neighbourhoods bear the brunt of such abstractions.

We need to be honest with residents that these problems will not go away unless the resources are in place to sustain multi-agency working over a long time. We need the council to be able not just to identify when a vacant flat has been broken into and used as a drug den, but to take possession, put security in place, make repairs and then get that home to one of the decent families who deserve it and desperately need it. We also need the police to be able to escalate; to focus on organised crime links, when they are there; and to effectively disrupt and break down the criminal forces that trap drug users in addiction, generate antisocial behaviour and create such fear in our communities.

We need to deliver on our commitments to tackle the housing crisis and drive forward economic growth that reduces poverty, creates more opportunities to get on in life and brings hope back to our communities. We need to repair our public services and economy after 14 years of Conservative failure, chaos and destruction. We need to divert ordinary users who are not yet caught up in gangs and ensure that they have multiple consistent, genuine routes to take back control over their lives and seek positive change.

The people of Leyton and Wanstead are resilient and committed to their communities. They deserve a future in which they feel safe in their homes and public spaces. With the Government's investment in neighbourhood policing, stronger penalties for antisocial behaviour and more targeted approaches to drug-related crime, I believe we can make significant progress. I will continue to

work closely with local leaders, the police and the Minister to ensure that we deliver the solutions that my constituents desperately need.

6.36 pm

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) on securing this important debate and on his excellent speech. He is already demonstrating that he will be a doughty champion for his constituents, and I very much look forward to working with him and discussing this important topic over the months ahead.

I know my hon. Friend's constituency a little and have spent a bit of time there. I know what an attractive part of east London it is, with many shops, restaurants and bars and a strong and vibrant community, so it is really concerning to hear what he says about the levels of antisocial behaviour. It is absolutely right that that is put in the context of 14 years of under-investment in local councils and public services.

Antisocial behaviour affects all our constituencies and has far-reaching consequences. It was good to hear the experiences of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda)—this is happening in everyone's constituency.

I want to start by saying unequivocally that any form of antisocial behaviour is unacceptable. It is not merely a low-level nuisance; it hits the poorest and most vulnerable communities hardest. If left unchecked, it leads to far more serious offending, which is why cracking down on antisocial behaviour is a top priority for this Government and a key part of our safer streets mission. This Government will ensure that we restore public trust in policing and local partners to tackle antisocial behaviour and create real, impactful change.

I turn to recent trends in antisocial behaviour. The crime survey for England and Wales shows that in the year ending March 2024, 35% of respondents personally witnessed or experienced antisocial behaviour in their local area. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead described in reference to his area, that includes groups hanging around on the streets, vehicle-related ASB and people using or dealing drugs. Those were the most common types of antisocial behaviour reported. Sadly, that figure has gradually risen by 7% in the past decade. We must aim to reduce those statistics significantly through the consistent joined-up work of police and local partners. I was pleased to hear about the local leadership provided by the police and the council in my hon. Friend's constituency, and how that was working well.

As my hon. Friend will know, this Government have committed to five core missions that seek to address some of the fundamental challenges society will face over the next 10 years. The safer streets mission will tackle serious crime: it will halve violence against women and girls, halve knife crime, and restore confidence in policing and the criminal justice system. It is focused on addressing both harm and confidence in parallel, by taking a whole-system approach.

Tackling antisocial behaviour is at the heart of the safer streets mission. It will rebuild confidence through the investment in neighbourhood police officers, who

will be at the forefront of the fight against antisocial behaviour. The past decade has seen a decline in neighbourhood policing to such an extent that many of the bonds of trust and respect between the police and local communities have sadly been lost. We are going to bring back neighbourhood policing, ensuring that thousands of additional officers are out patrolling in our town centres and communities as part of our mission to make the streets safer.

Through the new neighbourhood policing guarantee, we will ensure every community has a named police officer to turn to. We also want to ensure neighbourhood policing is protected. I note very carefully what my hon. Friend said about levels of abstraction and how that can affect neighbourhood policing. We recognise that no single agency can reduce antisocial behaviour alone. Achieving the goal we have set ourselves will rely on the police, local authorities, charities and the health service working effectively together. There are lots of examples across the country where that already happens. Agencies at the local level are best placed to understand what is driving the behaviours in question and the impact it is having, and to determine the most appropriate response.

We will legislate to ensure that antisocial behaviour powers are as effective as they need to be to tackle repeat offending. I reflect on the fact that under the coalition Government we saw a downgrading in the antisocial behaviour powers available to the police and councils. My hon. Friend talked about the Government's plans to introduce respect orders to help ensure that persistent adult antisocial behaviour offenders are banned from public areas where they are causing harm to communities. These changes are long overdue. I look forward to further addressing the House about respect orders in the months to come.

I want to talk about victims of antisocial behaviour and refer to the recently published report by the Victims' Commissioner, Baroness Newlove, called "Still Living a Nightmare". The helpful and insightful report looked at the experiences of victims of persistent antisocial behaviour, and highlighted a number of recommendations for the Government, including on improving the identification of persistent antisocial behaviour, support for victims and improved utilisation of the antisocial behaviour case review.

As we know, the case review gives victims the right to request a review of their case and brings agencies together to take a joined-up approach to finding a solution for the victim. It is vital that we enhance collaboration and communication between statutory agencies to create a holistic approach to dealing with antisocial behaviour. I am carefully considering Baroness Newlove's recommendations and what more we can do to support victims of antisocial behaviour.

I was particularly struck by what my hon. Friend said about how members of his community do not feel safe to report issues and about how they feel that the drug dealers have taken over their streets and are in control. That worries me a great deal, and it worries me especially that people do not feel safe to report, because reporting on issues is just so important.

I wish to say something about drugs, because my hon. Friend talked a lot about the problems around drugs. Again, tackling those problems is not something policing can do on its own. I recognise that tackling illegal drugs must be a key part of delivering the

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

Government's mission to make our streets safer. We know from the Crime Survey for England and Wales that people using or dealing drugs is in the top three antisocial behaviour issues that residents most commonly think is a problem in their area. I was particularly concerned to hear about what was happening on the Avenue Road estate.

It is clear that half of all crimes, such as shoplifting and burglary, are driven by drugs, which is why the Government are determined to crack down on antisocial behaviour and drug misuse. The police have a critical role to play in this area. Where individuals are found in possession of drugs, they must face appropriate sanctions. We are working with the police and the National Police Chiefs' Council to support voluntary referrals into treatment. We firmly believe that diverting those who use illegal drugs into interventions such as drug treatment services is key to reducing drug misuse, drug-related crime and reoffending. We support the use of drug testing on arrest and out-of-court resolutions to ensure that individuals who commit drug and related offences are given the opportunity to change their behaviour and to be diverted into meaningful and appropriate interventions.

I was pleased to hear from my hon. Friend about Project ADDER, which we know expanded to Waltham Forest in March this year. He also told us that the police in Leyton are using powers to tackle drug misuse and related offending. Through Project ADDER, police in Waltham Forest are using proactive operations to close county lines and disrupt organised criminal gangs. I also noted what my hon. Friend said about operations that seem to work in one area, but when resources are moved on, people resume the activities in which they were previously engaged, so I am very well aware that we need to address that.

I also note that Leyton is piloting community protection notices, which will include, in appropriate cases, a new mandatory positive requirement for individuals to attend drugs awareness programmes to tackle drug-related antisocial behaviour. That means that the police and

local authorities can require that attendance to change behaviour, and if the individual does not attend, that can result in an arrest.

Beyond enforcement, we know that treatment works to reduce reoffending. Giving offenders greater access to treatment services helps to break the underlying causes of their reoffending and increases public safety. We are committed to ensuring that anyone with a drug problem can access the help and support that they need, and we recognise the need for evidenced-based, high-quality treatment. Prevention of drug and alcohol-related harm is vital to saving lives and making our streets safer.

I am delighted that the public health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne), is on the Treasury Bench this evening, because I know that he is particularly interested in this whole area of drug and alcohol treatment. The Department of Health and Social Care is continuing to invest in improvements to local treatment services, particularly for children and young people, as well as adults with drug or alcohol problems, to ensure that those in need can access high-quality help and support. In addition to the public health grant, the DHSC has allocated local authorities a further £267 million in 2024-25 to improve the quality and capacity of drug and alcohol treatment and recovery, alongside £105 million that has been made available by various Government Departments to improve treatment pathways and recovery, and such things as housing and employment outcomes, which need to be part of the solution if we are to deal with people with drug and alcohol addictions.

I will conclude by repeating how grateful I am to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead for bringing this debate to the House. Antisocial behaviour is a key issue for this Government, and we have a very ambitious programme to make our streets safer, restore neighbourhood policing—the bedrock of policing in this country—and reduce the misery that antisocial behaviour causes for victims and communities.

Question put and agreed to.

6.50 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 23 October 2024

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Rough Sleeping

9.30 am

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling rough sleeping.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship today, Sir Christopher.

Night after night in Ealing Southall, people bed down in front of the Quality Foods shop, where a canopy offers some shelter from the rain, although it does not offer much protection from the biting cold. They sleep there all night, wrapped up in cardboard and ragged sleeping bags. Up the road in West Ealing, it is the same story. Indeed, data show that on any night in England in 2023 almost 4,000 people slept rough—a 27% increase on the previous year. It is a daily tragedy for homeless people, and of course it is also intimidating for people passing by and it cannot help but make our town centres less attractive for shoppers and businesses.

I recently visited Southall community college, which is trying to offer its students a good learning environment, but it says that it is hard to do so when there are people sleeping under the college awnings every night who are still there in the morning. The college has decent people who want to help, but they do not know where to start.

Hope for Southall Street Homeless is a fantastic local charity that helps homeless people and those sleeping rough—I recently visited and saw the range of services it offers, from a hot meal to eye tests to a Bollywood movie on a big screen—but voluntary services are straining under the sheer weight of people now sleeping rough. There was a brief respite during covid when the Everyone In programme moved almost all rough sleepers into accommodation, but when the covid crisis was over, the previous Government squandered that opportunity. They refused to learn the lessons and now the numbers are swiftly moving back to the pre-covid record levels of rough sleeping.

Some people might think that rough sleeping is something we just cannot fix—a problem that will always be there—but the last Labour Government reduced rough sleeping by more than two thirds in their first term by taking a cross-departmental approach. I really welcome the new Government's commitment to doing similar. I hope that the Minister will be able to outline the timeline for a strategy on rough sleeping and clarify which Departments are involved in the new interministerial group.

Rough sleeping has a number of causes, including a chronic lack of affordable housing. That is not surprising given that the previous Government presided over a net loss of 210,000 affordable homes over the last 10 years. I am delighted that the new Government are investing in 1.5 million new homes, creating a new generation of social homes in particular. Our low-wage economy also reduces the affordability of housing. Up till now, renters

could be kicked out without a reason. I very much welcome the new Government's plan to make work pay, which will ban precarious zero-hours contracts and fire and rehire, and our Renters' Rights Bill, which will ban section 21 evictions, giving renters more rights.

Many of those sleeping rough have mental health problems or substance misuse issues—many have both. They need intensive support, but we know that the NHS is in crisis. The Secretary of State has taken decisive action with a new 10-year plan, but I hope the Minister will ensure that the needs of rough sleepers are taken into account when designing community mental health and addiction services that will help to reduce rough sleeping.

Although we are taking steps to reduce rough sleeping by building new housing, improving renters' rights, making work pay and rebuilding our NHS, it is all being undermined by the previous Government's broken immigration and asylum system, which literally creates rough sleepers. In Ealing Southall, many of our rough sleepers are single men in their 60s, although they look even older from their time on the streets. They often come from India originally and do not speak much English, despite having lived here for many years. They might have worked in construction or catering and rented a home, but something went wrong in their lives and when they went to look for help to avoid becoming homeless, they discovered that they did not have the correct visa. They get told they have no recourse to public funds—NRPF—and cannot access housing or welfare support. With no housing benefit or universal credit, some of them end up with no option but to sleep on the street. In some ways, their experience is similar to that of those affected by the Windrush scandal; they get asked for piles of evidence that they did not keep, because they never knew there was a problem with their papers.

Some 3.3 million people in this country have been told that they have no recourse to public funds. That is a massive increase in the number of people being denied access to basic services. Many have the right to services—they just need help to track down paperwork and to make their case—but in a Catch-22 situation, they are not allowed to access help to prove their status. Rightly, this Government have taken on the staff to start assessing claims to ensure that those without a right to remain in this country are removed, but I hope the Minister will consider what can be done to offer advice and support to those people who have a right to live in this country, so that they do not end up homeless.

Many of those with no recourse to public funds status who are sleeping rough have significant health issues, including heart disease and stroke, but they often cannot access the care they need. Local authorities are not aware of their duties under the Care Act 2014, and they worry about spending money illegally. Added to that, of course, local authorities saw their funding decimated under the previous Government, so there is not a lot of money to go around. I hope that the new Government will consider clarifying local authority responsibilities in that regard.

Another growing problem is people coming out of the asylum system and ending up on the streets. The new Government have finally got the system working again after the costly and ineffective gimmicks of the previous Government. Ironically, however, people who

[Deirdre Costigan]

are assessed as refugees with the right to asylum in this country are being given no chance to make a life here. Under the previous Government, people granted refugee status were getting as little as seven days' notice to leave asylum accommodation—eventually changed to 28—but that is still far too short a time, especially as the local housing duty does not kick in for 56 days. I hope that the Government will give consideration to whether it would be sensible to align those timeframes better, whether local authorities can be notified in advance, and whether improved support can be put in place, so that we end the frankly ludicrous situation in which we agree that people are refugees and have a right to be here but turn them out on to the streets.

In Ealing Southall, we also have a significant number of EU nationals sleeping on the streets. For reasons that can include chaotic lives or mental health issues, they may not have submitted their settled status paperwork on time; and now they are stuck in limbo. It is easy to say that they could go home but, as an immigrant myself, I understand how hard it might be to admit that the streets of London were not paved with gold—that they failed to make it. I hope that the Minister will look at simplifying the EU settlement system, offering more advice and support, and a better assisted voluntary return system for those who would consider going home.

A further issue to bring to the Minister's attention is the chilling impact of the previous Government's right-to-rent legislation, which has meant landlords wrongly think they need to see a passport before they can rent to someone. Many people born and bred in this country do not have a passport, and the policy is only legitimising discrimination, so I hope that the Minister will consider the impact it is having on homelessness. I am afraid it is not just the asylum and immigration system that is adding to the numbers of those sleeping on our streets; 15% of prisoners were released into homelessness in 2023, and 4,100 people were released from hospital on to the streets.

Money always helps, and I look forward to the Government making provision for tackling rough sleeping in next week's Budget, but we can make a huge difference to rough sleeping just by stopping policies that create homelessness in the first place. We all want to end rough sleeping, and the new Government's focus on building affordable homes, making work pay, rebuilding the NHS and strengthening renters' rights will have an impact, but we will never solve the problem if the previous Government's immigration and asylum system continues to be allowed to cause homelessness and rough sleeping. The system we inherited is creating destitution by its very design. Not only is that morally wrong; it is a false economy. It just creates a bigger problem that costs us more to fix through acute services, and it is impacting on our town centres.

The new Government have made rough sleeping a priority and committed to a cross-departmental approach. I hope that the Minister will work with her colleagues in the Home Office, and in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that those making up their bed on the street tonight will not have to wait much longer for help to rebuild their lives.

9.39 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. Well done to the hon. Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan); homelessness has been one of the key issues that she has raised since arriving in this place. It is a pleasure to be here, as I said I would be—others are here for the same purpose—to support her quest for betterment for those who are homeless. I also welcome the Minister to her place. It is a pleasure to see her, and we look forward to her contribution. I also welcome the shadow Minister, who is a well-seasoned campaigner and will be able to pick over the issues as well as all of us.

The hon. Member for Ealing Southall set the scene well. It is always with great sadness that I hear the comments of hon. Members regarding rough sleeping across the UK. The hon. Lady set out—I am trying to pick the right words—the desperate scene for people who are homeless and explained what they go through. This is a UK-wide issue, facing all constituencies. I always like to give a Northern Ireland perspective. Rough sleeping may not be as massive an issue in Northern Ireland as it is in other parts of the United Kingdom, including the hon. Lady's constituency, but it is something we have to raise awareness of, and this debate gives us that opportunity.

I will give some examples of the issue in my constituency, and talk about those who respond. There is a collective responsibility on us all, including Government bodies and all the people who look after individuals who are homeless and rough sleeping to be better prepared to help and support them.

There is almost a stigma around rough sleeping—the idea that those who have no other choice in life have made incorrect decisions to find themselves in those circumstances. I say that respectfully. In some cases, those people might look for solace in things that do not provide it but give them more heartache and pain. I think of substance abuse, which makes it difficult for people to get their lives back on track; the whole thing is a real journey, like being on a train and not being able to get off. That is the reality for some people who rough sleep, although it is certainly not the case for all. Rough sleeping could be due to relationship breakdown, financial circumstances, the availability of housing and so on.

In 2023, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive released figures on rough sleeping. By their nature, these figures are not astronomical from a mathematical point of view, but they tell a story of 45 people who were rough sleeping—a 36.4% increase on 2022, when the number was 33. Although that might not seem like many, that is 45 people who are homeless—rough sleeping—and have nowhere to go, and in many cases, they have no hope.

I want to respond in a small but, I hope, effective way by speaking of those who step up. Of those 45 individuals who required support and asked us to do better, 32 were in Belfast, which is about 15 to 20 miles from my constituency, and a further seven were in Newry. Sometimes the figures might not reflect what is really happening. Why? Well, I mentioned church groups to the hon. Lady before the debate; church groups, individuals and volunteers, including the street pastors in towns in my constituency, are all well aware of what is going on. I thank them for what they do, as they respond directly

by meeting and having direct contact with people. They play an important role, which the Minister might mention when she sums up.

We cannot do it all ourselves, but we can do it with others. That is the point I want to make. I ask the Minister how we can work better with street pastors and church groups. By coming through the street pastors, church groups respond to those people who are homeless and rough sleeping. Those people are looked after by the churches directly. They find them accommodation and somewhere to sleep overnight. They give them a meal. They try to get them back into the benefits system where they need to be, because they may even have gone completely off the radar.

The next group that I want to refer to is veterans. One veteran in my town of Newtownards did an overnight sleep-out. He wanted to highlight the issue. I was glad that I was not sleeping out overnight as well, because I think if I got down into that wee tent, I could probably only with difficulty get back out again, but he did it overnight. What was he doing? He was highlighting the issue for veterans. There are so many veterans who are under the radar and perhaps not able to get the help that they need, so this veteran highlighted that.

I say to the Minister that when it comes to veterans as people who sleep rough, we need to remember the horrors of what they experienced in uniform, whether that was in Iraq or in Northern Ireland—it would be in our case, but there are other parts of the world where they fought in uniform, and nightmares of what they went through have affected them. This veteran slept out overnight. I stayed along with him for the photograph and to speak to him and to tell the press what the object of the exercise was—so what are we doing for veterans, Minister? Again, it is a very specific question.

I acknowledge that, compared with other constituencies, we are fortunate that rough sleeping does not seem to have as great an impact, but it is still there. Northern Ireland does have a clear issue with homelessness, though. I have lost count of the people and families who have come to my office looking for help because, for many reasons, they have no home. This information is backed up by Simon Community. I just want to take us from the issue of rough sleeping to the next stage of where we are.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): My hon. Friend is making a very eloquent speech on this matter regarding the importance of churches and street pastors and of veterans. Does he agree with me that many are sleeping rough as a result of mental ill health, and that it is important that we get to the crux of that problem in Northern Ireland and right across this United Kingdom, and ensure that our health service is providing the mental health services required, so that people feel that there are other options?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for that point, which is absolutely critical. The hon. Member for Ealing Southall referred to it in her contribution at the beginning; although this Minister is not directly responsible for the issue of mental health, there is a need for Departments to work better together, so perhaps in her reply the Minister can give us some information about that.

Simon Community has revealed that, in Northern Ireland, 25,000 people are experiencing—to quote its word—“hidden” homelessness. To give an example, there was a young man in my office just a few months back.

He had recently broken up with his wife and was asked to leave the family home. Relationships do break up. It is always sad when they do, but that is a reality of life. This young man continued to pay part of the mortgage, as his two children were living at the home. He could not afford a private rental and was severely struggling to get rehomed on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive list, quite simply because he was single and fit and healthy. Therefore, the points system did not enable him to qualify for homelessness points or the points needed to get a property. What did he have to do? He had no choice but to sleep in the back of his work van, and that is what he did up until a few months later, when eventually it was sorted. There are so many single men and women out there who are likely to be on the waiting list for years before they get an opportunity to be rehomed.

The official homelessness statistic for Northern Ireland currently stands at 55,500 people, including 4,500 children. There are so many reasons, but one prevalent issue is that the cost of private rentals is astronomical. People are being asked to pay some £700 or £800 a month, which is just not affordable with the wage bracket and median wage that they have in Northern Ireland. If we do not do more to tackle the homelessness crisis, including the rough sleeping crisis, we will ultimately have more people who have no choice but to sleep rough—that is where they are going. The mental health issues, the issues for veterans, including post-traumatic stress disorder, and the breakdown of family relationships have a direct and collective impact.

This will be my last comment. I still recall times when I was walking through the centre of Belfast and seeing the sleeping bags alongside St Anne’s cathedral. It was always very poignant for me to see that, because here we were in a town that was bustling and busy because of its nightlife, and there were people on the footpath who had nothing. There is more we must do to support people, and that must start by addressing the housing crisis in the United Kingdom and improving the availability and affordability of homes. We must put more emphasis on building sustainable homes and apartments for those who are struggling. We are grateful to all those charities that do so much without ever asking for anything back.

9.50 am

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for allowing me to speak in this important debate, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) for securing it, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his contribution.

As I have said in this place before, I spent two years working for a homeless charity in my constituency called Streets 2 Homes. My role was to locate people who had been reported as rough sleeping and help them to find long-term, secure tenancies. This issue is therefore close to my heart, and I hopefully have relevant experience in it.

I will start by talking about some of the issues I have experienced, and then I will suggest a few solutions. I am pleased that the Labour Government have introduced two important Bills: the Renters’ Rights Bill, which will ban no-fault evictions, and the Employment Rights Bill, which will give greater security in work. They will address at least some of the causes of rough sleeping, but there is still much more to do.

[Chris Vince]

First, we need to look at the causes of homelessness. Many of the people I supported suffered from alcohol and drug addictions. All, to some extent, suffered mental health issues, which were either responsible for or caused by their homelessness. In Harlow, we had the added complication that other councils, of all political colours, housed their most vulnerable people in our borough. That meant that, if they were evicted from their accommodation, there was a limit to the amount of support that the local authority could give them. National issues such as the cost of living crisis and the covid pandemic also had an impact on homelessness.

Although I recognise that the previous Government did some work on this issue, including providing Rough Sleeping Initiative funding—I have to declare an interest, because that partly funded my previous role—they put the onus on local authorities, which are already stretched to capacity. That funding is due to run out in spring 2025.

I know the Labour Government will take rough sleeping seriously, and I thank the Minister for attending the debate. We need cross-departmental work to tackle this issue. The National Housing Federation has repeatedly called for more housing, but part of the issue in Harlow is that accommodation that is categorised as supported does not provide sufficient support for the most vulnerable people who need it, which leads to issues with their tenancy, and sometimes results in their eviction.

It is important that the official homeless count does not miss anyone out: women are often missing from the rough sleeper count, and it must also include the hidden homeless. The hon. Member for Strangford made a really good point about them—we used to refer to them as sofa surfers, since they had a sofa to stay on and were not officially rough sleeping, but they were actually homeless and needed additional support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall is right that we should be proud of the previous Labour Government's record in tackling this issue, and it falls upon the new Labour Government to tackle the increasing number of rough sleepers in the UK. I believe that the only way to truly tackle many of the issues we face is to be proactive and tackle the root causes of homelessness and rough sleeping.

9.54 am

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) on securing and ably leading this important debate on rough sleeping.

Rough sleeping blights our communities and ruins lives. Being forced to sleep on the streets has a devastating impact on every aspect of an individual's life. It is a frightening and isolating experience that no one should ever have to go through, but it affects thousands of individuals every night who find themselves without a safe place to call home, facing the harsh realities of life on the streets. It is sometimes too easy to talk about this issue and reduce the problems that real people are facing to cold facts and statistics, but that overlooks the real human tragedy that this problem causes. I will not do that, and I believe it is vital that we understand not only the problems associated with rough sleeping, but the underlying causes that perpetuate this crisis.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): This is such an important debate and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) for securing it. We have had a massive increase in rough sleeping, and it is so important to get to the root cause. I declare an interest in that, until July, I was the chief executive of a homelessness charity in the north-east, where we have seen homelessness, and specifically rough sleeping, spike over the last 14 years especially. Our research found that 94% of people who are rough sleeping have experienced serious trauma. Would my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) agree that we have to get to the absolute root cause of rough sleeping, especially mental health issues, and that very often it is trauma? Also, in her remarks later, could the Minister respond to the need therefore to have a trauma-informed approach when we address rough sleeping?

Andrew Cooper: I agree with that; a trauma-informed approach would benefit a lot of areas of public life, and I bow to my hon. Friend's greater experience in this area. Rough sleeping is an intractable issue with many diverse and overlapping root causes, including a lack of affordable housing, unemployment, financial instability and family breakdown. Many individuals who find themselves sleeping on the streets are battling complex challenges such as untreated mental health issues, substance abuse and social isolation. Those challenges are often exacerbated by life on the streets, creating a vicious cycle that makes it extraordinarily difficult for individuals to transition back to stable living conditions. To tackle the problem of rough sleeping effectively, we must address those issues.

First, we need to see the construction of more social housing. Secure, affordable and accessible housing is the foundation of a dignified life. It provides not only shelter, but the stability necessary to seek employment, access healthcare and rebuild social connections. That is why I was proud to stand on a manifesto that promised to build 1.5 million more homes over the next five years, including social housing, to ensure that everybody has a safe place to live.

However, building more secure and affordable housing is only part of the solution. It is not enough simply to provide shelter. Simply placing people with complex needs in housing and then leaving them to it is setting many of them up to fail. We must also look to introduce properly funded wraparound support services, which address the needs of those experiencing rough sleeping holistically. That includes providing personalised assistance for individuals struggling with drug and alcohol addiction and mental health issues. By investing in such comprehensive support services, we empower individuals not only to secure a tenancy, but to maintain it, helping them to break the cycle of homelessness, rebuild their lives and foster greater independence and resilience.

We urgently need to see action on this issue, and that is why I welcome the Government's plan to introduce a new cross-Government strategy to tackle the difficult problem of homelessness. I really hope that strategy will take a comprehensive approach to tackling the root causes of rough sleeping and get us back on track to ending homelessness, so we create a society where everyone has a safe and stable place to call home, coupled with the support they need to thrive.

9.58 am

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) on securing this very welcome debate. Epsom and Ewell has proportionately one of the highest numbers of homeless households living in temporary accommodation in England, and it is in the top seven boroughs outside London. That accommodation cost the local council £1.6 million last year. I wonder if she would agree that the lack of social and affordable housing is contributing to the rise in rough sleeping, and that this issue should be a priority for councils in their local plans. I also concur with the many comments made about veterans. As defence spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, I agree that veterans are massively affected by homelessness, and we must support them better; I hope she would agree with that as well.

9.59 am

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Thank you for your chairing the debate, Sir Christopher, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) for securing it.

Homelessness is at a record high—we have heard the tragic stories from Members about people across their constituencies who are sleeping rough every night—and it is up 74% since 2010, which is a shameful legacy of the Tories. Like much of the south-east, my constituency is fighting a losing battle, with capped housing allowance rates, ever-rising rents and a shortage of supported housing and single-person affordable housing.

I recently met with Two Saints, a brilliant homeless charity in my constituency that does valuable work on temporary and supported accommodation for adults, young people and people with mental health problems. That visit showed me some ideas for action we could take to meaningfully reduce rough sleeping. Long-term funding is needed urgently to stem the reduction in public funds to address homelessness. For example, extending the rough sleeping initiative funding beyond the spring would provide more money for local authorities to make further strategic plans and tailor rough sleeping services. That would prevent the number of rough sleepers from spiralling out of control.

We also need to tackle the divergence in policy by area caused by the devolution of housing policy; for example, Hampshire county council intends to remove non-statutory homeless support by March 2026, which will leave other councils picking up those services. That will mean roughly £2 million a year being removed from homeless services, and if others do not have the capacity to fill the funding gap, over a thousand people across Hampshire will lose valuable support and be back on the streets. That is just a snapshot of the chaotic postcode lottery in support caused by the confusing mix of levels of government in Britain. We must address that by joining the dots on the national level with a long-term, strategic, cross-departmental approach to tackling rough sleeping and homelessness. We could create a single, ringfenced homelessness support fund, designed to adapt flexibly to local and individual needs.

I really am pleased to be in a Government committed to housing veterans, children leaving care and those fleeing domestic violence. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince), I am pleased with

the Government's Renters' Rights Bill and Employment Rights Bill, and I am also pleased that this Government are focusing on building more houses of all types and more social housing. But as part of that, we must have a proper focus on supported housing and single-person housing. Some 30% of households in Britain are now single person, but our home building currently does not reflect that. That allows for a rise in family homes being made into houses in multiple occupation. We must build the right types of accommodation in the right places. Alongside that, we can unlock access to the private rental sector by immediately unfreezing and restoring local housing allowance to cover the 30th percentile of market rents.

Ending homelessness makes sense morally and financially, but we must be bold and take this opportunity to provide safe and suitable housing alongside diverse support services that wrap around the most vulnerable constituents.

10.2 am

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) for calling this debate. People sleeping rough often have important things in common. They often have several support needs, such as mental ill health, substance misuse, an offending history, physical disability, self-harm, learning disabilities, experience of domestic abuse, sex work, abuse, neglect and modern slavery—pretty much some of the worst things a person can go through. But they also often do not get the entirety of the services and support they need, when they need them, in the ways they need them.

Frankly, that is the fault of nobody—certainly not the person sleeping rough—except the last Conservative Government. I say that with the immediate and direct experiences of having run a mental health and domestic abuse charity for the five years before I was elected, of setting up and sitting on a homelessness alliance, of chairing a mental health partnership, of being a councillor for 10 years and of serving as deputy council leader in that time. I can tell the House that over the 14 years of Conservative government, this problem got worse and worse.

I want to commend those leading and working in our services, because they are the most amazing, caring, understanding, dedicated people. We have heard from some of those people who are now in Parliament. In my constituency of Bournemouth East, I want to commend Bournemouth Churches Housing Association; St Paul's Hostel, which is run by BCHA; HealthBus; YMCA Bournemouth; Healthwatch Dorset, which has just produced a fantastic report on homelessness and health; Homewards, represented by the Prince of Wales; WithYou; We Are Humans; the citizens advice bureaux across Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole; and Shelter.

That goes to show the array of services available in my local area, but the services they lead and the systems they contribute are being held back by forces beyond their control. Underfunding has forced services to narrow and narrow their focus, year after year. As a result, they are meeting a smaller set of needs. Services cannot wrap support around as many needs as they would have done in the past; instead, somebody sleeping rough must engage with a larger set of services. No charity has

[Tom Hayes]

wanted to narrow its focus, but, left out of pocket, and often subsidising contracts, they just could not carry on delivering services without enough funding.

The result is twofold. First, our third sector's ability to support clients and contribute to healthcare has been eroded year after year, and secondly, the people needing support who no longer fit the referral criteria for a service will end up being bounced from pillar to post, and people with a combination of issues will always be the exception to somebody's rule. People who are willing to engage may become distrustful of agencies and refuse services, and that is a particular problem when people who are sleeping rough may, because of their needs, have difficulties keeping appointments.

When people are flying through revolving doors, increasingly distrustful of people and services, and feeling let down, they may experience crises. Without the support they need, that will only set back their health and increase the cost not only to their own health but to services that could wrap around them. Prevention is always cheaper and better than having to treat somebody's health.

The people in Bournemouth East working in these sectors know exactly what is going wrong, they know exactly what needs to happen, and they know exactly how things could be so much better. They tell me what needs to happen. They are clear that we need sufficient funding to run the services to meet the needs of rough sleepers.

What will that buy? First, it will mean that we have enough caseworkers with the time to care, because a flexible approach is needed to engage people with multiple support needs who may slip through the net of services. People sleeping rough typically benefit from longer-term interactions, and we need to understand that the funding should be available for those longer-term interactions rather than for short interventions.

Secondly, we need funding models that appreciate that work can go at a slower pace to achieve useful outcomes. That means having a system with the clarity, and the time to achieve that clarity, for the people working within it but also for the people accessing support.

Thirdly—and this cannot go ignored—caseworkers who are supporting people sleeping rough need to be at their posts in their organisations for a long period of time, uninterrupted, to develop relationships with the people they support and build trust. If they have to get out of bed worrying about whether they can pay their bills, or worrying about their own mental health, they are not going to be able to provide support to the people who need it the most. That requires taking away the reasons caseworkers may leave the service: not getting paid enough to survive; not being able to develop professionally with the training and new skills that they need; or having their resilience beaten down because they support too many people, their caseloads are too high and the needs they are meeting are so many, so varied and so complex.

I recently visited the Poole campus of Bournemouth and Poole college. I talked to the head, Phil Sayles, and he told me about a chap who had been sleeping rough on the park grass beside the college campus. Every

morning, he had packed up his tent to come into the college and learn. His relationship had broken down and he was unable to see his child; his life had fallen apart. But with the kindness and support of the college and the services around him, he was able to start to get his life back on track, and he is now flying. That is one person on one campus of one college, in one town in one part of our United Kingdom; there will be countless people across our country in similar situations.

I commend the Government for moving forward with the endeavour for a cross-departmental long-term strategy. We have ended rough sleeping before, during the pandemic; we can end it again. We just need the necessary political will, and the people who know what the solutions are to be listened to.

10.8 am

Mr Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) on bringing this very important debate to the Chamber. I also congratulate the hon. Members on both sides who have raised important examples of homelessness and the real individual tragedies that people are facing.

As Liberals—both as the Liberal party and as the Liberal Democrats—we have always prized freedom from poverty as our constitutional objective, so it is not surprising that the first piece of homelessness legislation, the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977, was pioneered by a Liberal MP, Stephen Ross. Before that, great Liberal legislation introduced the concept of council housing, which led to half a million council houses being built in the ensuing years. Today, though, that duty to homeless people has been weakened and watered down time and again, and we see the heartbreaking results on our streets all too often.

The Conservative Government promised to end street homelessness by 2024, yet we see rising numbers of people sleeping rough. Over 16,000 single households were assessed as sleeping rough in 2023-24, which is almost a 15% increase over the previous year. The crisis is not just about rough sleeping; there are now over 117,000 households in temporary accommodation, including 74,000 families with children. That is shocking and unacceptable in a civilised society. The figures reveal a failure to provide safe, permanent homes for those who need them.

Rough sleeping is driven by several factors, including relationship breakdown; benefit changes, which all too often push people into unaffordable housing; and poor mental or physical health, including substance dependence. Without proper housing those problems worsen, leading to more people on our streets and more strain on public services. Organisations such as Arc in Taunton do great work, particularly with veterans, whom we have heard about from several Members today. However, the Government need to provide the necessary funding for those services to continue. Under current plans, Government funding for the rough sleeping initiative is due to end in March next year, leaving many homelessness services facing a financial cliff edge of their own.

I therefore urge the Minister to ensure that funding is extended in the upcoming Budget to prevent the shocking numbers of rough sleepers that we have seen. I also urge

the Government to recognise the general financial strain that local authorities are under, and act to ensure that they have sufficient resources to deliver the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and to provide accommodation for survivors of domestic abuse.

Ultimately, we need long-term solutions not temporary measures, which is exactly what we set out in our manifesto. We would exempt homeless people from the punitive shared accommodation rate, which means they simply cannot afford to get the housing that they need, and give local authorities the funding that they need to meet the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act. We would introduce a new “somewhere safe to stay” legal duty, giving people emergency accommodation and an assessment of needs as of right if they are homeless and need it, and ban section 21 evictions, which we are delighted to see the Government moving forward on.

Because we cannot have Housing First without having the houses first, we want to see the Government build 150,000 new social and council rent homes per year. Homelessness and rough sleeping is not inevitable. It is time we built the homes and provided the services to bring it to an end.

10.12 am

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Christopher, so soon after we were engaged on local government matters yesterday. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) on bringing forward this debate—I know her constituency well as mine is nearby—and I congratulate Members on their contributions, which have illuminated not just some of the policy and political angles, but the genuine complexity of the rough sleeping issue.

The measurement of rough sleeping across the United Kingdom commenced in 2010. The last Conservative Government felt that it was a high priority and, consequently, we moved from a situation under the previous Labour Government in which less than a quarter of local authorities measured the number of people rough sleeping in their area at all, to one where all local authorities were required to use a standard methodology to count the number of rough sleepers and indicate the composition of that population.

That measure fed into a number of policy initiatives over those years. We saw a growth in the number of people recorded as rough sleeping on the streets from 2010 to 2017, and then some ups and downs. We saw a reduction from the 2017 peak to the number we see today, with a particularly low figure recorded during the covid pandemic, when the Everyone In policy was rigorously pursued by local authorities across the country.

It is clear that this matter is not simply one of political will. We note that, despite the high priority that Labour placed on it in opposition, the highest increases in the number of rough sleepers on the streets were in Labour-led local authorities, and the most effective authorities at reducing the number were Conservative-led. I see some shaking of heads, but Westminster, Camden and Bristol consistently top the list of authorities with the highest numbers of rough sleepers on the streets.

We also need to note that around 46% of all the people sleeping rough are in London and the south-east. The hon. Member for Ealing Southall provided a graphic description of what she has seen—one reflected on the streets of our capital, in particular. As other hon. Members have acknowledged, it also reflects a complex set of issues that lead to people sleeping rough.

The issue of veterans was a high priority for the previous Government. I have to note the work of the former Member for Plymouth Moor View, Johnny Mercer, in driving forward the so-called Operation FORTITUDE, which set up a direct and guaranteed route out of rough sleeping for any veteran who required it.

Tom Hayes: Will the hon. Member acknowledge that many of the Labour local authorities he was just referencing are in densely urban areas, which, according to research into homelessness, tend to have larger numbers of homeless people? Will he recognise that those authorities, like Conservative authorities, have been significantly starved of funding in recent years, to the point that council leaders, both Conservative and Labour, have been crying out for relief from Government? Will he also acknowledge that, with the starvation of many of our public services, people who are sleeping rough could otherwise often have received support earlier, but because they did not they now have to sleep rough—and that that is the fault of the Conservative Government?

David Simmonds: It is not an excuse. It is clear when we look at the performance of local authorities in that respect, and in particular in respect of the effectiveness of the many measures introduced following the Homelessness Reduction Act sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), that the authorities that were good at everything demonstrated that they were also good at reducing the number of people who were sleeping rough. Those of a more questionable performance standard, however, did not demonstrate that they could step up to the plate, despite being provided with additional resources.

Seeking to make a political point rather glosses over the complexity of the matter, as highlighted by many hon. Members. I will finish my point around veterans. We know, according to the current snapshot, that around 3% of those sleeping rough are thought to be veterans of our armed forces. Providing a specific guarantee, with a freephone number and an online portal, so that accommodation that met their requirements could immediately be found for anybody in that situation, was an important example of how that particular group can be addressed.

It is also interesting to reflect that the snapshot data consistently shows that those sleeping rough tend to be older adults aged over 26; that they are overwhelmingly male, although I acknowledge that female rough sleeping is sometimes hidden; and that the numbers recorded are very small—in some years, zero—for people under the age of 18. That goes to the complexity of the issues highlighted by a number of hon. Members. It is not simply a matter of a lack of supply.

We know about the complexities around addiction, domestic violence, patterns of previous accommodation by local authorities that have ended with difficulties with landlords, issues of settled status—or lack of it—and immigration circumstances. All those factors contribute

[David Simmonds]

to the complex set of reasons that affect an individual who should be able to access help from a local authority. Like many other hon. Members, I have sat through homelessness interviews with constituents who seek that help and accessing it can be incredibly difficult when a number of those complicating factors come together.

How is the issue to be tackled? From 2010 to the most recent election, a number of measures were introduced. I refer to the Homelessness Reduction Act, which sought to give both additional duties and powers to local authorities to work with those at serious risk of becoming homeless—not just to prevent rough sleeping but to stop people from being placed in substandard temporary accommodation that did not fully meet the needs of their household.

More recently, we saw the introduction of “Ending rough sleeping for good” in 2022, which was a £2.4 billion multi-year programme aimed at bringing to an end, as far as possible, rough sleeping on the streets of our country. Although that was clearly not a matter of law, it was a significant and important Government programme. Many hon. Members participated actively in the debates on that and brought their views to bear on shaping a programme that included the rough sleeping accommodation programme, with an additional 6,000 units of accommodation aimed at bringing people in off the streets.

As I move to a conclusion, I will share some reflections on my time in local government. The snapshot is beginning to be taken in a consistent way, so we have a reasonably good idea of at least the trends, if not the detail, of the numbers that may be sleeping rough. One of the challenges, however, is that the snapshot always takes place around the same period in autumn. We know that the numbers of people sleeping rough in our country tend to be higher in the summer when the weather is better and that the numbers decrease as winter comes on.

One major factor that the rough sleeping snapshot is not readily able to capture is the availability of temporary accommodation in night shelters and short-term shelters set up, for example, by churches and other charities and voluntary organisations. We know that they are incredibly important for those who have not found assistance for whatever reason in the statutory sector.

My local authorities have contracts with local charities that open up those shelters when the weather begins to turn cold; they staff them and provide beds, heating, food and showers. In the spring, those services are unwound, and that means that some of those people are either back on the streets or, if the service is performed as we would hope, they have been found a pathway into a job and into more permanent housing.

The consequence of that patchwork provision still means that we do not always have a clear idea of the number of people in that situation because they genuinely have nowhere to go on that occasion; many who may have been booked accommodation by a local authority instead choose, typically because of addiction, to be on the streets with others who share their addiction rather than to use that accommodation. That is frequently cited as a major issue with the operation of

the Homelessness Reduction Act. This is a complex issue. The numbers overall in our country are small, and they are declining.

Tom Hayes: The hon. Gentleman made valid points about using a street count to determine the number of people sleeping rough. Does he therefore agree that the numbers of those recorded as sleeping rough over the past 14 years are the tip of the iceberg and that the vulnerability, often in urban areas, is far higher?

David Simmonds: That reinforces my point. We have gone from a situation under the previous Labour Government in which there was no counting at all. There was no serious effort to understand the numbers of people sleeping rough on our streets. As a councillor, I was responsible for some of that period for housing and social care; rough sleeping was one of those major challenges that was simply put in the too-hard-to-deal-with box.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Although I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point—data may not have been gathered before—there has been a 134% increase in homelessness in Yorkshire and the Humber since 2010. Does he not agree that the strategies put in place by the previous Government have not worked? There is now a need to review them and for the new Government to introduce the things we have talked about: homes for veterans and places where people can go as soon as they are in trouble. That would provide the support they require for their addictions and mental health.

David Simmonds: It is also striking that the biggest reduction in homelessness in Yorkshire and the Humber has been achieved by North Yorkshire’s Conservative-led unitary authority. Local authorities have been able—through the Homelessness Reduction Act, the use of their various powers and the resources brought to bear on this issue, including the homelessness prevention grant—to deploy those resources efficiently and effectively. I would not wish for this issue to become purely a matter of politics. The matter is over. The fact is that rough sleeping has been an issue over decades; it has been recorded over centuries, not merely the past 14 years.

David Smith: I repeat my declaration of interest: I have been chief executive of a homelessness charity for the past eight years. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that, although homelessness has always been with us, it has increased in the past 14 years—by more than 140% between 2010 and 2018 and by an aggregate of more than 120% between 2010 and 2024? Does he also agree that, apart from Everyone In, which brought about a dramatic reduction, there was an ongoing and consistent increase in rough sleeping under the last Government? Does the hon. Gentleman not also agree that Everyone In—I was part of that response—was evidence of what Government can do if they treat rough sleeping as a public health concern? Does he agree that the lessons were not learned from the initiative and that, since it finished, there has been another spike in the past few years?

David Simmonds: Given the time constraints, that is the last intervention I will take. I agree with some of the hon. Gentleman’s points. The evidence around Everyone

It was positive. The way in which it was carried out by individual local authorities varied enormously because they tend to know their population and situation much better than anybody in Whitehall ever would. The flexibility introduced by the Everyone In policy was carried forward in the rough sleeping action programme and is intended to address the issue much more effectively.

Although I do not deny that the statistics show that following the success of Everyone In there has been an increase, and more recently a decrease, in the numbers of people recorded in that rough sleeping snapshot, I would not agree that there has been no attempt to learn lessons. In fact, when we reflect on the debates in which we all participate in Parliament and on non-legislative issues such as the “Ending rough sleeping for good” programme, which was specifically designed to implement the lessons of the Everyone In programme in a more long-term and sustained way, we see no suggestion at all that there was a lack of attention or effort. The question is whether the outcomes fully reflect that.

Let us consider what the Opposition’s asks or challenges might be as the Government reflect on the policy going forward. No recourse to public funds was introduced by the last Labour Government following the expansion of the European Union. They decided, ahead of other countries, to increase the numbers of countries from which people could come to the UK under free movement. The decision was taken because that Labour Government had a concern about the public’s perception of people coming to the UK to access benefits. We know that that was not the case. That is simply not a factor, but that was the reason why that last Labour Government introduced that policy.

The former Member for West Ham, Lyn Brown, did a huge amount of work on this matter in opposition and the Department for Work and Pensions is now looking at it, partly to consider whether those no recourse to public funds measures, introduced in the 1990s, are still the best fit for the situation today, and also to reflect on the fact that there has been a very large increase in the population of our country during that period. A significant number of people came to our country with no recourse to public funds as part of, for example, working visa conditions.

The last Government debated a question that the new Government will now have to consider: whether no recourse to public funds is applied to the extent that it should be and how it should interact effectively with our immigration system. As I have experienced myself, the issue clearly manifests at a local level with people who, for example, have come to the UK to work in an important public sector job or to fulfil vital services. For whatever reason, they have fallen out of that job and are then, because of the no recourse to public funds condition, not able to access benefits. They find themselves in great difficulty. Although from Whitehall’s perspective that should act as a powerful disincentive to staying in the UK, the fact that legislation going back to the National Assistance Act 1948 compels local authorities to provide varying packages of support and, particularly if there are children in the household, to house people, despite the fact that they have a no recourse to public funds condition, creates significant local cost and significant complexity in working through those cases.

My asks to the Government are about the continuation of Operation Fortitude and the 3% of rough sleepers calculated to be veterans who have benefited enormously

from having access to it. Operation Fortitude is designed specifically for those from a military background who might have found it for whatever reason difficult to access statutory support; it guarantees the provision of accommodation immediately through access to a freephone number or a website, allowing for people’s different circumstances. That important programme was implemented by the previous Member for Plymouth Moor View, Johnny Mercer. If the Government are to continue with it, that is welcome. If they are not, an effective, appropriate and equivalent alternative should be provided.

On the rough sleeping initiative, I ask the Government to continue to commit to the funding. The programme is under way and funded until spring next year. It has done a huge amount to support local authorities to bring about the reduction in rough sleeping from the 2017 peak. My ask to the Government is that they either commit to continue the policy of the previous Government or announce an equivalent programme that will bring about the same outcome: bearing down on rough sleeping.

Finally, I ask the Government to acknowledge that the rough sleeping snapshot shows an incredibly diverse and variable issue. The Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole local authority has also reported a significant increase in the number of rough sleepers. Members representing coastal towns, for example, have started to describe that issue, which was previously seen as more of an inner city, urban matter. We need to ensure that we have a good handle on what is happening.

When the Minister updates the snapshot and looks at the guidance provided to local authorities about how that snapshot is counted, she should ensure that we build on the effectiveness of the work since 2010 to understand for the first time what is happening with rough sleeping in our country, and try to make it more sophisticated. We need to better capture, for example, rough sleeping households that might include children and are often reluctant to make themselves visible at all to statutory authorities.

We need to ensure that women in particular, who may fall outside the snapshot, are captured more effectively in it, and that those under the age of 18 not travelling with adults in a family, but on their own, are better captured. That group are frequently sofa-surfing rather than sleeping rough, but they still have nowhere permanent and safe to go. They are currently not captured by the data because the system is simply not designed to do that. With those asks, I close for the Opposition.

10.30 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) for securing this important debate on tackling rough sleeping and all colleagues for their excellent contributions, their insight, their expertise and the examples they gave of the great work in their constituencies up and down the country. This is a challenge that we have to tackle collectively.

Homelessness and rough sleeping have skyrocketed in recent years. In England, as we have heard, homelessness is now at record levels. In March, more than 117,000 households,

[*Rushanara Ali*]

including more than 150,000 children, were living in temporary accommodation. What is more, last year the number of people sleeping rough in England increased for the second year in a row and was 27% higher than in the previous year. Nearly half of all people sleeping rough on a single night in autumn are in London and the south-east. In places such as the London Borough of Ealing, part of my hon. Friend's constituency, the number of people sleeping rough on a single night increased by a staggering 121% between autumn 2022 and autumn 2023.

Those are not just numbers—behind them, as we have heard from hon. Members, are the stories of people devastated by homelessness and rough sleeping, of people in need who were not given the right mental health support, of vulnerable women sleeping rough on our streets, many of whom are survivors of domestic violence and abuse, and of families having to raise their children many miles from their schools and support networks. The scale of the challenge is huge. That, sadly, is what we have inherited from the previous Government. The scale of the response will need to be cross-departmental, which is not easy, but this Government are absolutely committed to and determined about addressing the high levels of homelessness and rough sleeping. We need to develop and deliver a set of long-term solutions, otherwise the danger is that we take a sticking-plaster approach, as we have seen in the past.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall pointed out, we must ensure that all parts of Government and the public sector work together with organisations in our local communities. We made it clear in our manifesto that we will develop a new cross-government strategy, working with Mayors and councils across the country to get us back on track to ending homelessness once and for all. The Deputy Prime Minister will chair a dedicated interministerial group, bringing together Ministers from across Government to develop the long-term strategy. I am passionate about tackling this terrible injustice and I want to work with colleagues throughout the House to do so, so I am delighted to see the level of interest and the expertise shared with me today and in other discussions. Working with Ministers in different Departments is vital to tackling the challenge. The Deputy Prime Minister and I are already engaging with ministerial colleagues across Government.

It is an absolute scandal that so many people live without a roof over their heads, and that families with children are living without a permanent place to call home. I see in my own constituency and on my visits to homelessness services the devastation that homelessness causes to families and individuals. It is unacceptable that the people affected do not have a safe and decent place to call home, which is why we have to take action to address the immediate challenges as we approach winter. The Government are providing support to local authorities, and I am grateful to the agencies and tiers of Government that are doing work on this issue.

Hon. Members have highlighted the consequences of homelessness and rough sleeping, including the scarring effects of the physical and mental health challenges that people face, and the long-term consequences for families, children and young people. Homelessness can happen not only to those who are materially disadvantaged, but to people from well-off backgrounds, who may be escaping abuse or leaving home as a result of family breakdown

and much else. We all know stories of the impact on people who end up becoming rough sleepers. We have heard powerful stories of adversity caused by life events and shocks, which those who end up sleeping rough do not have control over.

There is an impact on children, who are often placed far from their communities in temporary accommodation. That disrupts their schooling and their life chances and opportunities. Too many children spend years in temporary accommodation at a point in their lives when they need space to play and develop, and nutritious food to eat; they need to thrive and access education. Mothers are living in hotel rooms with their children, often sharing a bed with their older children, and do not have access to cooking facilities. The knock-on effect on their health and wider needs is horrific.

The all-party parliamentary group on households in temporary accommodation reported the case of a mother who was placed in temporary accommodation with both her children, who have physical disabilities. She said:

“some places were filthy, with blood-stained walls...where the welcome pack stipulated ‘no weapons allowed’.”

That is completely unacceptable.

To turn that around, we have to tackle the root causes of homelessness and rough sleeping, not just the symptoms. We must put in place lasting solutions. That is why we are bringing together Ministers from across Government to develop the cross-departmental strategy. We are working in lockstep with councils, Mayors and the charity, community and voluntary sectors.

On the support that is being provided while we develop our strategy, the £547 million Rough Sleeping Initiative, which began in April 2022 and runs until March 2025, will continue to support up to 300 local authorities across England. That programme funds a range of vital services, from accommodation and Housing First and outreach staff, to specialist services, including support to tackle physical and mental health challenges, and for those who have left the prison system. The programme also includes training to widen employment opportunities, and provides immigration advice.

The rough sleeping drug and alcohol treatment grant funds targeted services to improve drug and alcohol treatment and provide support to people who sleep rough, or who are at risk of doing so and have substance misuse needs. We are working closely with local authorities to understand the local pressures, and will continue to support them.

Lee Pitcher: In Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme, we have amazing community groups that support, through relationships and connectivity, those who live with or are recovering from addiction to alcohol or drugs. As part of our futures strategy, is there an opportunity to learn from things like the Recovery Games, which happens every year in Hatfield? Tens of thousands of people come along who have formerly lived with drug and alcohol abuse, in the knowledge that there is a community out there who can support them and give them the determination and resilience to thrive.

Rushanara Ali: As I was saying earlier, I am keen to work with colleagues. I have already indicated to officials that as part of our work across Government, we should

make sure that Members of Parliament have the opportunities to meet me and feed in their perspectives, insights and powerful examples of what works. Unless we draw on that expertise and the direct experience of those who have faced rough sleeping and homelessness, as well as the organisations working closely with them, we will not address the deep-rooted challenges. I look forward to work with colleagues.

Beyond rough sleeping, hon. Members will have seen from our manifesto our overall commitment to tackling homelessness, crime and domestic abuse, and improving mental health. Those issues can cause rough sleepers and others to experience multiple disadvantage, and are systemic. We must look at them to ensure we deal with the root causes. We need to ensure that services are co-ordinated and able to help people to address their overlapping and interconnected problems. Despite some people coming repeatedly into contact with service providers, and resources being invested, if the work is not joined up, it can often mean that an individual's multiple needs are not addressed.

The changing futures programme was designed to support people experiencing multiple disadvantage, and it tested better ways of working by considering people's experiences and obstacles as a whole. In Northumbria, our programme supported a man called Brian. His life spiralled into crisis after two traumatic events and, between 2008 and 2022, his needs escalated. Over those 14 years, he had 3,300 interactions with public services, but now, with the right help, he is turning his life around. That example goes to show that a lot of interventions and work can go in, but it can take a long time and be very challenging. We must look at how we streamline services, ensure that the interventions are effective and get value for money for the individual.

In September, I had the opportunity to visit one of the changing futures hubs in Greater Manchester. It was evident that a strong relationship is vital to ensuring that people receive the right support in the right time. The beneficiaries I spoke to emphasised how important trusted relationships with staff are to their recovery.

David Smith: I again declare an interest: until recently, the church I led had a changing futures hub based in it. It is a simple point, but would the Minister agree that Government services, excellent though they can be, must orientate not towards treating people as issues, but towards having the genuinely joined-up approach across Government, as we have declared will be our strategy? Ultimately, we need to see people as people, who sometimes have multiple and complex needs.

Rushanara Ali: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and I absolutely agree with him. That is the spirit in which we want to work and learn from the models that have been effective. Let us not forget that when we look at the journeys of people who have ended up as rough sleepers or facing homelessness, they have been part of our communities. They have often worked in public services. I met a nurse who, after a series of shocks in her life, ended up sleeping rough. People can experience family breakdowns that lead to them ending up sleeping rough. We must ensure that services are focused on the individual needing that support and work around that. I know there are many great examples, including, of course, from the previous Labour Government, as was mentioned earlier, with the work that was done and

the ambitious target that was set and achieved. We also need to learn from the work that was done during the pandemic and build on what worked. I am very pragmatic about how we approach this agenda because we are determined to take action, support people and tackle this challenge.

The example of the changing futures programme was striking because of exactly those points about multi-agency working, joining up, and focusing on the individual to give them confidence and give them that back-up by having people assigned to provide mentoring, support, coaching and the rest of it. I know that there are many great examples, including, of course, in our own respective constituencies, and I see, week in and week out, the heroic work that they are doing. It is vital that we continue to help and support them.

More widely, we are taking action to tackle the root causes of homelessness. We are delivering the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation—recognising that the supply of housing is critical—with our commitment to building 1.5 million homes over the next five years. As has already been mentioned, which I am grateful for, we are also committed to abolishing section 21 no-fault evictions, preventing private renters from being exploited and discriminated against, and empowering people to challenge unreasonable increases.

On funding, £450 million of third-round funding has been made available for local authority housing funds to create 2,000 affordable homes for some of the most vulnerable families in society. That will support local authorities to obtain better quality temporary accommodation for homeless families, and will provide safe and suitable housing for those on the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme who have fled persecution.

I also wanted to point to a temporary accommodation project that I visited called the Peony Project, which is run by Depaul UK, a charity that works with adult women who are homeless. It was really impressive and inspiring to see the work that it is doing with vulnerable women. I know that there are many other powerful examples; I see that with the work that is being done by organisations in London and other parts of the country to support women. Projects such as those are critical in supporting vulnerable women, who face particular challenges as rough sleepers.

Amanda Martin: I speak as a former teacher: will the Minister ensure that, during those discussions and consultations, youth provision and the housing of youth is also taken into account?

Rushanara Ali: Absolutely. I hope very much that, as part of the strategy that we develop, we can bring in the different perspectives. And, of course, I mentioned from the outset the consequences on children and young people, children in care and accommodation for care leavers. This is a big agenda and we need to make sure that these elements are built in. I am delighted to see the level of enthusiasm among colleagues, with officials, as well as Government Ministers, including in the Department for Education, wanting to really focus on this agenda as part of the strategy.

A number of other points were made by colleagues in their powerful speeches, and I want to focus on those. I have already mentioned some of the interventions already

[*Rushanara Ali*]

announced by the Government on 11 September, through the Renters' Rights Bill. As I mentioned, we will deliver on our commitment to ensuring that we transform the experience of private renters and provide them with better support and protection. The Government are clear that we also need to bring homes to a decent standard, and have extended Awaab's law to achieve that. We know of many examples of people in poor quality accommodation, and there needs to be a step change in improving the quality of housing. The Government are also clear that discriminatory treatment on the part of anyone carrying out right-to-rent checks is unlawful. The Home Office has published codes of practice on what landlords are expected to do and how to avoid discrimination.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall raised important issues related to the asylum system. We have inherited a total failure across the asylum system from the previous Government. As the Home Secretary told the House on Monday, that included £700 million spent on a scheme that sent only four people to Rwanda voluntarily. We are determined to restore order to the asylum system, so that it operates swiftly, firmly and fairly.

We recognise the potential challenges that individuals granted asylum may face when they need to transfer to accommodation in mainstream wider society. We have to act to ensure that there is a smooth transition. I am grateful for the points my hon. Friend and others have made. I know local authorities and others in the sector have raised the notice period as a challenge in supporting people to move, once their status has been determined, to avoid homelessness.

Those are the points we need to take into account, working across government, to look at how best to address them, ensuring we do all we can to avoid people leaving the asylum system into homelessness. I have already started discussions with colleagues in the Home Office and will continue to do that.

Tom Hayes: Will the Minister give way?

Rushanara Ali: I am running out of time, so please make it brief.

Tom Hayes: Integrated care boards are expected to have a dedicated focus on reducing inequalities in access to and outcomes from health care in the populations they serve. Clearly, rough-sleeping people are among the health inclusion populations that integrated care boards are supposed to have a dedicated focus on. Will the Minister talk a little about the importance of integrated care boards in supporting the access of people sleeping rough to GPs and dentists?

Rushanara Ali: My hon. Friend makes an important point. That is why the involvement of the Department of Health and Social Care and other relevant Departments is key. Not least, because there are also issues around step-down care, when people leave the healthcare system, whether a hospital or other services.

To respond to the point on public funds, we are keen to ensure we work across government with the Home Office on those issues. My hon. Friend the Member for

Ealing Southall will be aware that women form the majority of those being exploited in modern slavery, and they can end up sleeping rough. That is an important agenda. The Home Office has committed to hiring 200 additional staff to process cases. Thousands of vulnerable people will receive faster decisions on their cases, so that they can move forward, while making the process more efficient. Those new employees are being recruited and will be in post in early 2025. Modern slavery is a huge issue. I have seen that through my own work and visits to organisations that do inspirational work to protect those being exploited in that way.

On veterans, no one should leave the armed forces and have to sleep rough. I am grateful to hon. Members for raising that important issue. They will be aware that the Prime Minister made announcements at the Labour conference on our commitment to making changes, to provide the crucial support to ensure that veterans do not sleep rough.

The point has been made about domestic abuse, particularly in relation to women. We recognise that there are particular issues with violence against women who are sleeping rough and their experience is very different; and £9.2 million of funding is available for women-specific rough sleeping services. We will take action, as part of the cross-departmental strategy, to make sure that we continue to provide the appropriate support for women who have been sleeping rough.

To go back to the issue of veterans, more than £8.5 million is being spent on the reducing veteran homelessness programme that has been established. That is part of the agenda to provide support to veterans.

Supported housing is a big issue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) mentioned. We are taking action, building on the work done in the previous Parliament to improve the quality of supported housing through the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023, which was supported by Members across the parties, including Conservatives. There is more to say and do on that; it is a critical area. Hon. Members will be aware that, according to the National Housing Federation, we will need to have a further 170,000 supported housing units to deal with the need by 2040. With an ageing population and the existing need, that is a huge agenda.

Hon. Members raised the important role that charities and community organisations play, and I commend them for the work they do. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the challenges in Northern Ireland and some of the great examples of work. We are keen to learn from the good practices in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, along with city regions in England, about how we tackle this issue.

On trauma, local authorities have made great strides to provide trauma-informed services, and we will look at what more we can do to support them.

In conclusion, this is a really important agenda. It requires comprehensive work across Government. It also requires the expertise and input of colleagues across the House and organisations on the frontline, who have done extraordinary work to protect and support people. I very much look forward to working with colleagues, as well as organisations out there, to tackle the deeply damaging problem of rough sleeping and homelessness.

10.57 am

Deirdre Costigan: Thank you, Sir Christopher, for your excellent chairing of this debate. I also thank the many hon. Members for their contributions.

I regret that the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), completely failed to take responsibility for the more than doubling of rough sleeping under the previous Government. He seemed to think it was more important to count rough sleepers than to do anything about them, and he failed to say anything at all about the almost a quarter of a million social homes that were lost under that Government. However, I appreciate his support on looking again at the no recourse to public funds designation and the massive expansion of that, under the previous Government, to 3.3 million people.

I thank the Minister very much for her response. I am delighted that the new Government are focusing on social housing, renters' rights, making work pay, and rebuilding the NHS. I very much appreciate the cross-departmental focus that this Minister is bringing to this issue, and particularly the leadership from the Deputy Prime Minister, who I think will bring the priority we need to rough sleeping.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling rough sleeping.

Holiday and Second Homes Regulation: Cornwall and Isles of Scilly

11 am

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regulation of holiday and second homes in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly.

I am delighted to have secured the opportunity to debate this motion. It is worth emphasising that this is about not the politics of envy, but the politics of social and housing justice. Many people are concerned about the proper provision, allocation and use of property, particularly residential properties, in those areas with a significant preponderance of holiday and second homes. The tourism industry in such areas is vital, but it is important to get the balance right in the usage of properties and how, and which, properties are used in the industry. In such areas there is often a big mismatch between earnings levels and house prices, given the large amount of wealth that wishes to invest in those properties, so we need to ensure a proper balance.

It is also important to understand the distinction between second and holiday homes. Often, in discussions and media commentary, the two are confused. They are two sides of a coin, but in regulatory terms they are significantly different. Some properties flip from one form of regulation to the other, from being second homes operating under the council tax regime to the holiday lettings sector, which operates in the business rates system.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. In previous Parliaments, he has proven himself to be an advocate for those who have such issues. Does he not agree that we need to make the most of tourist potential—as we seek to do in the incomparable Ards peninsula, which I represent—but a fundamental need is to have housing stock available for people to live and raise their children in, without being outpriced by the demand for second homes?

Andrew George: Indeed I do agree, and I am grateful for that intervention emphasising the points that I and many of those present wish to make. Although we are talking about Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly specifically, the subject clearly has wider impact across the country as a whole.

The context is important in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Over the past decade, more than half a billion—£500 million—of taxpayers' money has been handed out to holiday home owners in Cornwall alone under a variety of different and variable tax incentives available to the holiday lettings sector, such as the small business rate relief system for furnished holiday lets. Perhaps most scandalously, because those properties were entitled to such relief, they were entitled to covid aid as well—£20,000 to each one of them, for no very good reason.

The latest figures in Cornwall show nearly 14,000 second homes and more than 11,000 properties registered as short-term lets, as far as businesses are concerned. The most recent trawl through the larger of the holiday letting websites showed nearly 22,000 active listings. That figure was recorded on an initial trawl, but it does not represent the full scale of holiday lets available.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): In the hon. Member's discussions with the public, private and voluntary sectors, is there any higher imperative across the whole of Cornwall than dealing with the issue of holiday and second homes? In my experience, there is no higher priority than grasping the challenges we are facing, which impact not just coastal areas, but towns in the middle of Cornwall, because people move from the coast to inland towns.

Andrew George: The hon. Member is absolutely right. On the one hand, we are trying to address the desperate housing needs of local families. We have in excess of 20,000 families on the local housing register, and we know that is merely the tip of the iceberg—the need is a great deal more. On the other, a lot of local families are being evicted from their private rented accommodation to make way for yet more holiday lets. If we do not recognise that, we are failing to grasp the full picture, so he makes a strong point.

I acknowledge that this is an important part of the Cornish economy, but it is worth noting that when one looks for accommodation in places such as Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, the hotel and guesthouse sector is just as—if not more—important, in the sense that it competes with the holiday letting sector without many of the incentives and benefits that the self-catering sector enjoys. For example, many operate above the VAT threshold, whereas those in the holiday letting sector, if they take it down to a single property, do not. Of course, they face many other regulations as well.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that second and holiday homes have a big impact on the hospitality sector, because businesses find it difficult to find accommodation for their staff, especially in places like Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly where there is limited accommodation, which then makes it difficult for them to run their businesses?

Andrew George: That is absolutely the case. As a visitor to the Isles of Scilly, my hon. Friend knows that that is a significant problem, because people cannot commute to the Isles of Scilly to work. It is difficult to commute to work for businesses providing those kinds of jobs in many of the coastal areas around Cornwall, and many people find themselves living in very informal settings, including caravans, because nothing else is available to them.

I will rapidly run through some of the regulations concerned: council tax; small business rate relief; the furnished holiday lettings scheme; holiday business registration, which the last Government proposed, and the planning use class changes. First, on council tax, going back to the pre-history where this all originated, when the Conservatives originally introduced the council tax system—what they called the community charge—they introduced a 50% council tax discount for second homes, because they said second home owners were not using all the services and therefore should not have to pay for them. That was the justification back in the 1990s.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member mentioned some of the solutions. Would it not be a good idea to consider giving a suite of powers to a local authority so they could pick and choose which of those would suit that local authority and those particular circumstances?

Andrew George: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that intervention. Indeed, she anticipates something that I will come on to in a moment.

Going back to that pre-history, we managed to make that change under the previous Labour Government. Indeed, I remember well a debate in this Chamber on 9 February 2000 when I raised these issues almost a quarter of a century ago. Chris Mullin was the Under-Secretary of State responding to that debate. I had raised the issue of the unfairness of the 50% council tax system. I had been campaigning pretty much on my own for some time until that point. I made the point to the Under-Secretary that the responses I had received from Government had been complacent. I hope the Minister, who I am pleased to see in his place today, will consider the precedent set by Chris Mullin when, towards the end of his response, he said:

“The hon. Gentleman said that he had received a rather complacent response from the Government, and, indeed, I have here a rather complacent response, which I will not read out. I merely say that the issue was reviewed about a year ago, and at the time there were no sufficiently cogent reasons for a change. I am, however, willing to follow up the point in my Department. Perhaps we can discuss it later.”—[*Official Report*, 9 February 2000; Vol. 344, c. 112WH.]

Chris Mullin and I did discuss it later, and the policy was changed.

One of the lessons from that is that we can effect change through these debates if Ministers are receptive to the arguments we put forward. I hope the Minister will consider that. The last Conservative Government responded to pressure. A lot of us were arguing very strongly against the way second holiday homes were being treated, although I was outside Parliament during my nine-year sabbatical. They could not withstand that political pressure; they had to respond to it. Indeed, they announced the intention to increase the premium on second homes by up to 100%, to be imposed by local authorities.

Have the new Government carried out any kind of impact assessment on the change in council tax arrangements for second homes? Have they considered whether it would have a counterproductive impact, if it was not married with a suite of other regulatory changes? People might switch from council tax to business rates and use the small business rate system, for example, and pay nothing at all. They may take other options rather than paying council tax.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. To build on the point made by the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), does he agree that we need local councils in Cornwall, the Isles of Scilly and elsewhere to be given greater powers to ensure that second home owners pay properly towards mitigating the overall impact of those homes on local communities? This is not about banded council tax or business rates; it is about the wider implications, for which we need to perhaps consider changes.

Andrew George: My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is not just the housing impacts; it is the wider societal and community impacts property investors have on local communities. I hope that when the council tax increase comes in, the Government will be clear on what local authorities can do. Will the council tax

increase provide additional income that local authorities can use to address housing need, or will it result in a reduction in the central Government support grant to local authorities? Cornwall is staring down the barrel of a £100 million deficit, so that issue is very significant. A number of us are making the argument that council tax could go up by 200% or 300%, rather than 100%, in some areas because of the impact second homes are having, in order to adjust things as we believe they should be adjusted.

I have already referred to the impact small business rate relief has had. It has clearly been a major incentive for property investors to invest in holiday lets in areas such as Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. Although the small business rate relief system is due to expire next year, could the Minister be clear about the Government's plans for the future? There are no doubt pressures from that sector to reintroduce a similar rate relief. Although I do not think that is justified, for very obvious reasons, there are parts of the sector, particularly those holiday lets under an occupancy restriction, that could perhaps be included. We have had a campaign success, in that the last Conservative Government insisted on a 70-day use to justify the rate relief, but that needs to be reviewed.

I hope that the Government will be clear about how the registration scheme will be introduced, and I know that Cornwall council has offered to assist the Government in that. The council has expertise and is keen to introduce the registration system, but it needs to know how the scheme will work, what level of verification and inspection will be required by the council and what income can be raised. It will be an expensive process and Cornwall is offering to be a pilot area, if the Government wish.

Let me turn to the proposed planning use class change, which the Liberal Democrats have long argued should apply to all non-permanent occupancy residences. In other words, second homes and holiday lets should all be within one category, because we believe that the impact is the same on local communities, and therefore the change should apply not only to holiday lets but to second homes.

I hope that the new C5 use class for short-term rentals, which was announced by the previous Government, will be looked at with care, particularly the fact that it appears to fall under permitted development rights. In other words, local authorities specifically have to apply an article 4 direction to avoid a situation where someone converting a property to a holiday let simply announces it to the local authority and does not need to seek permission. I hope that the Minister will look at that issue. In the Liberal Democrats' view, we also need to look at a sunset clause on those permissions; otherwise, there will be a perverse incentive for all of us to seek planning permission for that use class change in order to get a market advantage or an inflated price within the market. There should be a sunset clause, relating to the end of that usage, ownership or change within the Land Registry.

In conclusion, I will simply say that this is a very important issue in areas such as Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, and—as we can see from today's debate—in many other parts of the country. A suite of policies and changes need to be addressed by the Government, and many of us across all parties would be keen to work

with them to ensure that the balance is absolutely right, and that local housing need is given the highest priority of all.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher, and it is a pleasure to respond to such an excellent speech by the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George). This is our first opportunity to work together because I was elected after his sabbatical commenced, and I am very much looking forward to working with him in the spirit with which he ended his speech. I know that there is a lot of interest in this area; I have spoken to my hon. Friends the Members for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) and for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) a lot over the years about this, and I know that there is cross-party interest. I always think working in the spirit of Chris Mullin is a very wise idea, and I think we will work in that spirit. The hon. Member for St Ives certainly will not see any complacency from me and my colleagues. I thank other Members who have contributed to the debate, and I will try to cover the points raised as I go.

From what the hon. Member for St Ives said, as well as the previous debate raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Rachel Blake), it is clear that having a high concentration of second homes and/or short-term lets brings significant challenges to those communities—indeed, they may be the biggest challenge, as my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth said. Therefore, they are passionately advocating for effective regulation. I hope this is seen as a virtue, not least because we are a new Government, but those who follow the debates on this issue will know that we are actively considering the best course of action to help local authorities. I will talk about some of the things we are doing now, in the spirit of wanting to ensure that we go further.

I have not read the debate from 24 years ago. I confess to colleagues that as well as watching TV on a Saturday night, I will read old debates; I love the old transcripts. It is amazing to see how some debates evolve, and there is also always excellent content that perhaps one could pass off as their own, certainly if they went back far enough to not be detected—not that I would ever do that, of course, Sir Christopher.

This issue bumps up against a housing crisis with years of low house building, and rising interest rates that have made home ownership unattainable for many people. It is a core mission of this Government to address that challenge. The issue is more acute in places such as Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly and other coastal, rural and urban communities, where it is exacerbated by the proliferation of second homes and short-term lets. Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly are undoubtedly some of the most beautiful areas not just in the country but in the world, and are therefore popular choices for tourists. However, that has real consequences for local residents—whether it is high prices relative to earnings, people being pushed out of the choice of home ownership or having to leave their community, a stretched private rented sector with significant pressure on local economies, families and communities, or steadily growing housing waiting lists.

[Alex Norris]

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) talked about the self-defeating cycle. During the passage of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, her colleague, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), spoke thoughtfully and passionately about the challenge of people going to a beautiful community for a week or weekend, and then going to the pub and not being able to get food because the chef has nowhere to live. These things will eventually impact the quality of the offering and therefore perhaps its attractiveness.

Steff Aquarone: This issue is a problem in many places, but even within places like North Norfolk, there is not even distribution. We have an overall figure of one in 10 homes being second homes, but some villages suffer up to 50%, which has an impact on temporary accommodation for the homeless. Does the Minister accept not just the circumstances but the urgency of the need for these measures?

Alex Norris: Yes, that is right, not least because once we get to that tipping point, the consequences can be profound and rapid. Of course we need action today, and I will speak about that.

One of the many important things that the hon. Member for St Ives said was that this is not about envy; he made a good point about balance. What his community and colleagues' communities are asking for is a recognition of balance. They want to have a thriving tourist sector, but they need to be a place where people can live and where the consequences of those who make significant profits are shared fairly. It is about finding that balance and we have not got there yet, which relates to his point.

I want to talk about some of the issues and housing demand itself.

Andrew George: I just want to re-emphasise that many people who own second homes in Cornwall make a significant contribution to the local community, and indeed a financial contribution, because they recognise the impact of their privilege. As I say, this is not about envy, and a lot of those who own second and holiday homes are conscious of the impact.

Alex Norris: That is an excellently made point. I always wonder which of these debates attract people watching online; I suspect this might be one of them, and I hope that people have heard that message. We are talking about finding that fair balance, but I am sure we all agree that we have not found it yet.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Although we can all agree that the politics of envy need not play into this discussion, and that we need a proper licensing regime for holiday lets as the furnished holiday lets tax regime ends, does the Minister also agree that we ought to ensure that the homes coming out of that regime do not end up flying under the radar, and in some cases operating unsafely? We need also to look at mitigation or transitional arrangements for that industry to ensure that bona fide holiday businesses in the sector can continue to operate and we do not produce the opposite effect from what is intended with these reforms.

Alex Norris: That is a thoughtful, well-made point. We must make sure that we have thought things through so that there are not unintended consequences, which could cause significant harm.

I will come to the furnished holiday lettings regime, but I want first to talk about the register, because the hon. Member for St Ives made his kind offer of help from Cornwall. I will certainly raise that with colleagues. The lack of data and the limitations on what the data can tell us can create challenges. We need that registration scheme. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is leading on that, but we are working with it on the process. The Department is working at pace to operationalise the scheme as soon as possible, but it is important first to ensure that it works. To update colleagues, it is currently in the initial phase of digital development, and that is enabling us to test and refine possible options for design and delivery. We know there is eagerness and we will update the House again as soon as possible, but that kind offer has been heard by me and officials.

It is sad to make a debate about beautiful parts of the world about tax, but I am afraid that tax is an important part of this. We have committed to end the furnished holiday lettings tax regime from April next year, which I think will be welcomed. Doing so will take away certain advantages that incentivise short-term, rather than long-term, letting; that is the right thing to do. As the hon. Member for St Ives said, the premium of up to 100% on second homes will come in from next April. It is a discretionary power, but I think local authorities will be keen to use it. The hon. Gentleman talked about going further; he might have to let us have a go with the scheme as it is first before we do that, but we are mindful that the premium is up to 300% in Wales, so we will consider the impact of that. That money can be spent on local services, to address the hon. Gentleman's point.

We are conscious that colleagues in this place and beyond still think we could go further, and we are looking at the tax treatment and keeping it under review. We will consider the additional powers that local authorities may need, but given that we have novel powers in this space, it is handy to for them to be used.

Perran Moon: Will the Minister give way?

Alex Norris: Briefly, because we are running out of time.

Perran Moon: Does the Minister agree that the issue of second homes and holiday homes in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly is not uniformly faced across the entire south-west, and that the role of the local authority in dealing with this issue, if they have the powers to do so, is absolutely key?

Alex Norris: Yes, that is very much my world view. Colleagues will see from my time in the Department that my emphasis is on getting the right powers and resources to communities to use in the way in which they know will work best, because colleagues in this room are experts on Cornwall in a way that I am not. I see my responsibility as giving them the tools.

On the concern regarding attempts to game the heightened council tax payment, the system includes criteria on the number of days that the property has been let out for holidays, and we will monitor, and are mindful of, the functioning of those criteria.

The hon. Member for St Ives also asked about small business rate relief. He would not, in the spirit of our new working relationship, want the Chancellor to smite me just seven days before a fiscal event, so I am afraid he will have to wait. He also mentioned people being removed from their homes so that the property can be let out. That is why I am sure we will get significant cross-party support for the Renters' Rights Bill, particularly for ending section 21, or no-fault, evictions. Finding that balance and giving renters that protection is important everywhere and clearly in his community.

We must also increase supply. The Government have made significant commitments by which we will be measured: on the building of new homes, on unblocking stalled housing, and on building new towns in the fullness of time. We want this country to be a place where people can own their home if they wish and where they do not have to leave their community to do so. I appeal for colleagues to work with their local authority, as I am sure they will, on their local plans to ensure that those plans are thoughtful, sensitive and written with an understanding of the community.

This is an exceptionally important issue, which is changing the character of, and creating challenges in, some of the most beautiful parts of our country and indeed the world. The Government want to work with those communities to find the right balance—that has been the theme of this debate. I have mentioned some of the things we are doing already, and we are committed to working with the hon. Member for St Ives and colleagues across this House.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I did not wish to take time out of this short debate, but I remind Members of paragraph 30 of “Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons”, which was issued by Mr Speaker:

“Men are expected to wear a tie”.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Water Companies: Regulation and Financial Stability

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regulation and financial stability of water companies.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your guidance this afternoon, Mr Pritchard. It is a real honour and privilege to have secured this debate on a matter of enormous importance to my constituents in Westmorland and Lonsdale and, quite clearly, to many around the room and beyond.

I wonder whether, in the aftermath of the 2019 general election, many pundits or politicians would have predicted that by the 2024 election water quality would be one of the top three doorstep issues, and a subject of discussion here and in the main Chamber within an hour or two of each other, and indeed within the same week as in the other place. That is exactly what has happened, and there are a number of reasons why.

First, leaving the EU meant that we needed to introduce our own legislation to replace what went before. In doing so, people, including MPs, looked under the bonnet, so to speak, for the first time and were horrified to see what was there: the sewage outflows into our rivers, lakes and coastal areas that had been long permitted.

Secondly, the last Government failed to take effective action to limit those outflows, allowing excessive dividends and bonuses on the one hand and inadequate infrastructure investment on the other.

Thirdly, the situation is objectively getting worse. Climate change, higher rainfall, inadequate regulation and failure to invest in infrastructure renewal means that 2023 saw a 54% increase in sewage spills compared to the year before.

Fourthly, and just as importantly, this issue has emerged because community campaigners across the country have resolved that they will not accept this appalling situation and have led the way in holding water companies, regulators and the Government to account. Organisations in our Westmorland communities, such as the Clean River Kent Campaign, Save Windermere and the Eden Rivers Trust—and many more, both in my communities and around the whole UK—have engaged in citizen science, heightened awareness and galvanised public opinion.

The Liberal Democrats have made this issue a priority, too. Water is so important to us that my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) spent most of the general election campaigning about it—and, indeed, spent quite a lot of time in it! Having led my party through a previous general election, I know exactly how it feels to spend one's campaign in deep water, and even, on occasions, up to one's neck in poop.

I have the immense privilege of serving Westmorland and Lonsdale and being MP for, among others, Windermere, Ullswater, Conistone Water, Haweswater, Rydal Water, Grasmere, Brothers Water, the River Kent,

[Tim Farron]

the River Eden, the River Lune, many other rivers, and much of Morecambe bay. For us, water is deeply personal; it is precious to our biodiversity, our heritage and our tourism economy.

Failure to tackle the issue rightly raises passions, but the fault lies in the system. We have an industry financing model and a regulatory framework that are simply not fit for purpose. However, I do not want to demonise the people who work for water companies. Good, competent and decent people work for United Utilities in my community and for other companies across the rest of the country, on the ground and indeed underground. The same applies for those who work for the Environment Agency and Ofwat. They are good, hard-working and professional people working within a system that is badly broken, and that broken system has an appalling impact on communities in the lakes and dales of Westmorland.

I have a few figures to demonstrate the situation, courtesy of the Rivers Trust. Last year in Appleby, combined sewer outflows into the River Eden saw 46 spills. At Kirkby Stephen on the River Eden, there were 135 spills. At Staveley on the River Kent, there were 283 spills. At Tebay on the River Lune, there were 124 spills.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tim Farron: In one second. At Greystoke on the River North Petteril, there were 146 spills. I could go on, but I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Sarah Dyke: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his excellent speech. Data from Thames Water shows that Glastonbury and Somerton was the 16th worst constituency in England and Wales for sewage overflows. Does my hon. Friend agree that the commission should consider establishing pollution baselines and reduction targets?

Tim Farron: I absolutely agree. That reminds us that, of the over 464,000-plus spills that took place in 2023, most were legal and permitted—and most of them should not have been. We juxtapose this failure with the reality of money leaking out of the sector in the form of dividends and bonuses. Since privatisation, £78 billion has been paid out in dividends and, in the last four years, we saw £62 million paid out to company executives in bonuses.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the right hon. Member for giving way. He has a very beautiful constituency in the Lake district and has campaigned strongly on this issue. Would he therefore welcome this Government's commitment to cleaning up the water industry and that they called in the water bosses within the first week of the Labour Government to say that investment must be ringfenced for infrastructure and not spent on bonuses, and will he be supporting the Water (Special Measures) Bill?

Tim Farron: First of all, I am merely, and happily, an honourable Member, although it is very kind of the hon. Lady to call me "right honourable". Secondly, we

welcome many proposals in the Bill. We have already tabled many amendments in the House of Lords because although we think that the Bill is a step in the right direction, a lot more could be done. I will make more of that in a moment.

It is worth saying, as we are talking about bonuses, that although there was a 54% increase in spills between 2022 and 2023, it did not rain 54% more in 2023 than in 2022; there was no justification for that increase—and yet, the bonuses happen. I have never worked in an industry where bonuses were the norm, but my understanding is that they are paid for success, not as a commiseration for statistically proven and repeated failures.

It is easy to be angry about all this—I am, and maybe it is essential to be so—but it is just as important to be constructive and seek solutions. The depth, seriousness and complexity of this crisis means that the only answers that will work need to be radical and ambitious. Today's announcement of a water commission, which will consider these things, is welcome, but also a little frustrating. Do we really need to spend the best part of a year stroking our chins and pondering, when what is needed is radical action now? With respect, most of us pretty much predicted the likelihood of a Labour Government two years ago. Did the victory strike them as a surprise? Why were they not ready with a plan to deliver much sooner than this?

I have a similar view, as I have just suggested, about the Water (Special Measures) Bill. It contains many positives, including criminal liability for CEOs responsible for severe environmental failure, but it does not amount to the radical structural transformation that is so obviously needed. The British people rightly believe that they voted for a far more ambitious plan to be urgently delivered. Indeed, those who voted Liberal Democrat absolutely did vote for that, so we are determined to keep our word and fight for that action.

It seems obvious how regulation could be made better. Water industry regulation is fragmented, with environmental regulation done by the Environment Agency and business regulation done by Ofwat. That just does not work.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): To my hon. Friend's point about the need for a regulator with teeth, West Dorset saw 45,000 hours of sewage released into our rivers and beaches last year. The River Lim last year was declared "ecologically dead". Does my hon. Friend have a view on whether the regulator should be able to impose fines on the water companies that reflect the damage they are doing to our natural environment?

Tim Farron: I completely agree, and I will answer that point more fully in a moment.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the conflicting regulatory directives, which sit across all the different agencies that he has just referred to, are part of the problem and should be urgently addressed, without necessarily waiting for the long-awaited review?

Tim Farron: I thank hon. Members for both interventions. First, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello). One problem is that Ofwat has fined three—or maybe four—water companies in

the last year or so to the tune of about £170 million, and has collected precisely zero pounds and zero pence of those fines.

Secondly, to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths): absolutely—having regulators with conflicting responsibilities and rules is part of the problem. We have two inadequately resourced regulators with inadequate powers being played off against each other by a water industry that is far better resourced and able to run rings around very good people—but very harassed people—with the job of holding them to account.

The Liberal Democrats propose a unified and much more powerful regulator that we would call the clean water authority. That new authority would end the practice of monitoring being done by the water companies themselves—in other words, setting and marking their own homework. Let us put that right. Water companies should be charged the full cost of monitoring, but the monitoring itself should be carried out by an independent regulator so we can be sure that we are seeing the whole picture. Successive Conservative Ministers committed to changing that, but none actually did, so will the Minister commit the new Government to making that necessary change?

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. My constituents in Bicester and Woodstock are deeply concerned that Thames Water wants to hike its prices by more than 50% over the next five years. Just a month ago, I stood in the front rooms of constituents whose homes had been flooded with sewage because of the backing up of foul water drainage. Does my hon. Friend agree that the regulator he proposes, and which the Liberal Democrats support, should insist on and compel water companies to put performance before profit in their operations?

Tim Farron: Absolutely. That would be exactly the case at the heart of our community benefit model, which would be governed by a clean water authority. Profit would not be the overriding motive, and having the right people on board, including environmental campaigners in each area we are talking about, would keep the water companies honest and prevent the outrageous things mentioned by my hon. Friend.

The issue with the lack of reliability of data is key. It leaves us suspicious that the scandal could be even worse than we think. Just last week the BBC reporter that between 2021 and 2023, United Utilities illegally dumped sewage into Windermere for 165 hours, of which 118 hours were not reported to the Environment Agency. According to Environment Agency figures, United Utilities was the best-performing water authority in England in 2022 and, as a reward, it was allowed to raise £5.1 million extra by increasing bills, but—as we saw have now seen from last week's revelations—United Utilities did not report hours and hours of illegal spill decisions made on the basis of inaccurate information.

When water companies mark their own homework, there are consequences; indeed, there are deep consequences for my communities in Westmorland. Some 7 million people visit Windermere every year, alongside the other 20 million who go to the lakes as a whole. I will state for the record that I happily swim in Windermere and have

confidence in its safety in most places and at most times, but on behalf of our local community and especially our local hospitality and tourism businesses, I am deeply angry that the failure of the water company and its regulators to identify and solve these problems is not only beginning to damage our environment, but doing damage to the precious brand of the Lake district. That is why we need urgent, comprehensive, tangible and ambitious action, and why I am very grateful to my noble Friend Baroness Bakewell, who has tabled a Liberal Democrat amendment to the Water (Special Measures) Bill in the Lords to create a special status, with special protections, for Windermere.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Esher and Walton is a river community. The Thames borders our constituency, and the River Mole, which is a chalk stream, runs through it. The River Mole is one of the most polluted rivers in the country, and a quarter of the sewage poured into is from my constituency. This amounts to a failure that impacts on our health, our environment and our democracy. Why our democracy? Because it means the public believe that our Government turn a blind eye to this outrage and the ransacking of our public utility, therefore neither representing them nor serving their interests. Does my hon. Friend agree that this must not be allowed to happen again, and that we—and the new Government in particular—must deliver clean rivers and get this right?

Tim Farron: I very much agree. Regulation is the key. Welsh Water is not for profit and Scottish Water is publicly owned, yet they both still face major problems with sewage discharges. As my hon. Friend is getting at, there is evidence that although ownership and finances matter, effective regulation is the key, and we simply do not have that at present.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way. Does he agree that as well as regulation, commissions and the initiative proposed by his party, there is a massive breakdown of trust within the industry? I spoke to one of the major investors in Thames Water and asked them to tell me the last time that the regulator, the Government and the company's investors were in a room together, and that had never happened. Among all these initiatives, does the hon. Gentleman agree that getting people together to talk about their different equities and priorities, and how they deliver for the consumer, is also key?

Tim Farron: I agree. Although I also think an urgency is needed that many people who own water companies do not demonstrate, and that is why the Government need to lead—but I do think it is right that we get people together to make things significantly better.

Over the past 33 years, for every pound that water companies have spent on infrastructure and doing their job, 80p has drained away to finance debt and pay dividends. That is an appalling waste of billpayers' money and water company assets. The separation of operating companies from parent companies, where the regulated operating company racks up huge debts to allow the unregulated parent company to pay huge dividends, has been a disgraceful scam. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) will say more about how that model has done such

[Tim Farron]

damage to the customers of Thames Water; suffice it for me to say that that model of ownership must cease. For the regulator to have stood idly by while that has happened is unacceptable, and for it not to step in as similar asset-stripping begins in other water companies is an abysmal dereliction of duty by it and the Government.

What is to be done? I just want our waterways to work and to be clean and safe. I am not convinced that renationalisation would be a good use of public money. It could mean putting taxpayers' money into the pockets of those who have already made so much money out of them without a single extra penny going to improving infrastructure. We propose a radical move away from the current model: water companies should be community benefit corporations, ensuring that all revenue goes into keeping environmental standards higher and solving the long-term problems of our network. Given that 45% of all water company expenditure has gone on debt financing and dividends, that kind of ownership and governance reform should mean that there is more money available for infrastructure renewal.

Mr Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tim Farron: I will give way one final time, because I am running out of time.

Mr Amos: Will my hon. Friend congratulate the Friends of French Weir Park in Taunton for helping to get bathing water status for the River Tone? Is it not a scandal that after £4.25 billion was paid by Wessex Water in dividends, the situation may arise whereby that status is removed because the Environment Agency and the water company will not have enough money to invest in improving river quality over the next few years?

Tim Farron: I absolutely endorse the work of the campaigners in my hon. Friend's community. Those on the banks of Coniston Water have done the same in our area, raising the bar and the standards under the current regulatory framework, inadequate though that is.

It is clear that Thames Water has more than met the threshold to be taken into special administration, and I suspect that we will hear more about that later. As for the other water companies, the current regulatory framework seems to leave them immune, despite their repeated failure to meet basic obligations to prevent sewage from being dumped in our lakes, rivers and coastal areas, and even on the streets of many of the villages in my communities.

Under the current rules, to remove the licences to operate of the other companies, the regulator would need to serve a 25-year notice. I am grateful to my noble Friend the Earl Russell for proposing a Liberal Democrat amendment in the Lords that would take that ludicrous notice period down to just six months for an environmental failure. I hope the Government will accept that amendment; if they do not, I will table it in the Commons. Our vision is that the new, more powerful clean water authority would have the power to strip all water companies of their licence to operate within six months and then migrate them to the community benefit model. We believe that it is time for the British people to get a clean

water system under which they get what they paid for, their hard-earned money is not siphoned off by overseas merchant banks, and their precious waterways are not infected, outrageously, with untreated sewage.

I represent what I would argue is the most beautiful part of England. One of the reasons it is beautiful is that it is also the wettest bit of England. The failure of Governments of different kinds, and the regulators and water companies, to tackle storm overflows was always going to hit hardest in the places with the most storms. That is why we are frustrated that the Conservative Government, who denied that the problem existed, seem to have been replaced by a Government who have acknowledged the problem but have announced that they are going to ponder it very hard for a bit. It seems to me that the problem is very obvious, and therefore so are the solutions. I call on the Government to act ambitiously and comprehensively, and to do so now, without delay.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Let me make a few housekeeping points. We will have an informal three-minute limit, but if colleagues intervene a lot and we are running out of time, I may have to make a formal ruling from the Chair, which will mean that any interventions add a minute to the time of the Member who is speaking.

Can I just say that when colleagues attend debates in this Chamber, or any other debate, they really should wait for the end of at least the first speech, having intervened, before leaving? The person who left the Chamber is not here to hear that ruling, but I offer it as a gentle reminder for other colleagues. Also, when Members make a speech, they should remain in the Chamber until they have heard two other speakers before leaving.

My final observation from this debate is that if colleagues come in—[*Interruption.*] Order. Forgive me, but the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Mr Amos) might want to hear this. If an hon. Member comes in halfway through the opening speech, they should not expect to intervene, having not heard at least the introduction and some of the preamble to the substantive points.

I hope that is helpful. I share it from a point of weakness, having myself made all of those mistakes and many more over many years. We will have an informal limit of three minutes to start. I call Grahame Morris.

2.50 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Pritchard. It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing this important debate. There is no doubt about it: his constituency is blessed with some of the most stunning natural beauty in the world, never mind the country, from the fells and woodlands to the Lake district, a UNESCO world heritage site. The illegal sewage dumping at Windermere by United Utilities does not just shame our nation; it should be considered an ecological crime, and those responsible must be held accountable and face the full force of the law.

Although the Lake district is world renowned, I am equally proud to represent a hidden gem: the Durham heritage coast—or, to be precise, the east Durham heritage coast. Our magnificent magnesian limestone cliffs offer spectacular views of the North sea and in the summer the coastal grasslands are alive with rare wildflowers, creating a habitat for the Durham brown argus butterfly and other wildlife. That coastline, once scarred by industrial waste from coal, has been reclaimed by nature, yet now it faces a new threat: sewage.

Sewage overflows, far from being a rare event, have become routine in the water industry. In 2023, Northumbrian Water discharged raw sewage for over 280,000 hours in 46,492 incidents, including into the bathing waters off Seaham and Crimdon in my constituency. The environmental disaster is compounded by the economic abuse by water companies. Since privatisation in 1989, companies such as Northumbrian Water have neglected infrastructure while accumulating staggering debts to pay out dividends.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): My hon. Friend mentions his local water company. People in Leeds and Yorkshire feel ripped off, and it is no wonder, as Yorkshire Water has just announced its intention to increase prices by 35% by 2030. Does he agree that that is a compelling reason why the water companies should be brought into public ownership, so that they can put public service, the public good and environmental good ahead of the accumulation of profits for shareholders?

Grahame Morris: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Indeed, Northumbrian Water is not alone. Across the industry, financial mismanagement has gone hand in hand with environmental failure. Northumbrian Water alone has built up £3.5 billion in debt while paying out £4.1 billion in dividends to shareholders. That means that 19% of consumers' bills in my region go towards servicing debt.

I welcome the Government's Water (Special Measures) Bill. Its provisions to block bonus payments for executives, require annual pollution reduction plans, and improve transparency on sewage discharges are crucial. The tougher penalties, including the threat of imprisonment for those impeding investigations, are a necessary step. But while we are moving in the right direction, I fear that will not be enough to address the scale of the problem. Yes, the Bill strengthens regulation, and it is certainly more robust than anything proposed by the Opposition now or when they were in government, but will it solve the underlying issues? I suspect that the answer to that one is no.

We cannot ignore the fact that the public are already paying the price for this industry's failure. We pay through higher bills, polluted waters and an industry debt that now exceeds £60 billion. When the sector finally collapses under the weight of its own excesses, it will be the taxpayer who is left to pick up the pieces. I support the public ownership proposals. I think the costs are vastly exaggerated in the context of the scale of the challenge and the liability.

We must take steps now to fix the debt, pollution and infrastructure crises in the water industry, so we need to go further than is being proposed. Blocking executive bonuses is not enough. Without determined measures,

the consequences will be higher bills for consumers, more money lost to debt repayment, and an industry that continues to prioritise profit over public good.

2.56 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Pritchard.

Water is fundamentally a human right; everyone needs to use water at some point. The water companies, all now in private ownership, are responsible not just for the supply of water but, jointly with the Environment Agency, for river basin management, flooding and many other things. The private ownership of water since 1989 has resulted in £78 billion paid in dividends, mostly to foreign-owned companies, many of which do not pay tax in this country. It has resulted in a £60 billion debt collectively and £9.1 million has been paid to chief executives in utterly excessive salaries.

The argument for privatisation was that there would be more investment, and the water would be cheaper and the service more efficient. Well, that has worked out well, hasn't it? We have massive levels of sewage discharged into rivers and the sea, lower-quality water all over, and less and less investment in many areas.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the 285,000 people who signed the petition about renationalisation that I helped to present to Downing Street a couple of years ago, particularly those in the beautiful coastal town of Whitstable, have been badly let down by Southern Water on a daily basis?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. She put forward an excellent initiative at that time, calling for public ownership of the water industry. I will conclude my short remarks in a couple of minutes by addressing the question of public ownership.

I now want to refer to Thames Water, which covers my constituency and much of London and the south-east. It is one of the biggest water companies, the most indebted and the most inefficient, and it would be interesting to know how it survives. Two years ago, when even the *Financial Times* called for public ownership of the water industry and said that it was the norm around the world, I am sure it was Thames Water it had in mind.

Thames Water on its own has racked up £14 billion of debt. In 1989, on privatisation, its debt was zero. It has paid out £2.7 billion in dividends and £37 million in what it euphemistically calls internal dividends to its parent companies. The company could require as much as £10 billion to get its infrastructure up to regulatory standards. That would be compounded by the interest payments on its massive debt pile. My constituents suffer flooding and endless traffic disruption because of the lack of maintenance over many years. There have to be endless replacements of short sections of pipework, because there has been no proper planned investment programme.

My call is simply this. I am sure that the Government's proposed regulatory regime would be better than what we have at present, and it is good that the Secretary of State acknowledges the issues facing the water companies and all of us as consumers around the country. However,

[*Jeremy Corbyn*]

I simply say that once more we are into a debate between a regulator and the water companies, who this morning claimed they could not invest because of the regulatory framework.

I think we should go back to the issue of public ownership. I have no idea where the figures given by the Secretary of State today came from; perhaps he can explain that. The reality is that under public ownership Parliament would decide the share value and the amount of compensation paid, which would have to take into account the inefficiency and waste of the companies, and people would be compensated with Government bonds at a fixed rate of interest. That would give us public ownership and control. I do not want an old-style nationalisation; I want community nationalisation.

I will finish by saying that were local authorities, the workers in the industry, local communities and the Environment Agency jointly involved in how the water companies are run, their performance would be a lot better than it is with distant shareholders raking in massive profits from our water supply.

3 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship today, Mr Pritchard.

I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing this debate. The previous Conservative Government weakened water regulation, let our rivers fill with toxic pollution and allowed companies to pay themselves with huge bonuses while household bills soared, which was shameful.

Many constituents in York Outer are disgusted by that situation. We have the beautiful Rivers Foss and Ouse flowing through our constituency. To watch both of those rivers being degraded is not only unforgivable but bewildering. The mismanagement and lack of regulation by the previous Conservative Government have created a plethora of issues.

I have had constituents writing to me since I was elected about the stench of sewage seeping into Rawcliffe, water pump failures near Haxby and concerns about flood alleviation in Fulford. Although the Tories are no longer in power, those issues are not water under a bridge; they still need to be fixed.

That is why today's statement by the Secretary of State on the independent water commission is a great first step, and I am also delighted that my hon. Friend the Minister is tackling these issues at pace. At this early stage, my main suggestion is that we must take lessons from other regulated industries and regulatory failures within them when designing the future water regulation system.

When I was at the Bank of England, Sir Jon Cunliffe was highly regarded, so I warmly encourage him to look at the areas where there has been disjoin in the financial services regulator, and we should move to a centralised, smart regulator. For me, that involves looking at scrapping and replacing Ofwat. Perhaps Sir Jon could publish an interim view on that suggestion.

Although it is great to see so many people engaged in today's debate, it is still frustrating to see that we are here. It is clear to me that the Government are turning

the tide against chronic underinvestment in our water industries. Water companies must be regulated properly and the regulators must have the power to regulate the sector adequately, which must be the goal. If we can make that happen after 14 years of Tory failure, we will soon be sailing in smooth waters.

3.3 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing today's timely debate, on a day when the Secretary of State has made a statement in the House to announce an independent water commission. As I said during his statement earlier, the promise to fundamentally transform our water industry and clean up our waterways for good is welcomed and celebrated across the House. Our lakes and rivers are national treasures, yet water company executives have been degrading these resources to protect their own profits and shareholders, even while the companies themselves are drowning in debt.

The water system in England is at breaking point and water companies are not being held accountable for one of the worst environmental crises in the UK—the dumping of sewage into our rivers and lakes, and along our coastline. My hon. Friend said in his opening remarks that Ofwat has fined four or five water companies billions of pounds, but currently it has not collected a penny.

The damage done by these water companies is nowhere more apparent than in Chichester harbour, which is a site of special scientific interest and a national landscape but it is in unfavourable and declining condition, and desperately needs ambition to protect it.

The British public pay those companies not only to provide us with clean water but to ensure that there are safe and clean processes for waste water and sewage, while protecting our environment. Storm overflows are supposed to be exceptional, not the norm. During my election campaign, on the doorsteps I saw a real passion among constituents for addressing the problem of water pollution and sewage dumping. It has been a pleasure to meet passionate environmental campaigners across the constituency, such as Friends of the Ems and the group carrying out citizen science on the River Lavant. The Ems and the Lavant are both precious chalk streams. The UK is lagging far behind other European countries in water quality and the safety of our waterways, and our polluted rivers and lakes are becoming an anomaly.

At the time of privatisation, water companies were debt-free. However, over the past 35 years, as inflation and interest rates have risen, the debt burden on UK water companies, including Southern Water which serves my constituency, has grown significantly, in particular because much of that debt is linked to the retail price index. Borrowings across the sector now total about £68 billion and yet, during the same period, water companies have paid at least £78 billion in dividends to shareholders.

Earlier this month, an investor presentation posted on Southern Water's website revealed that the company is seeking to borrow up to £4 billion from investors to offset £3.8 billion in debt over the next five years. In addition, the company has proposed a staggering 73% increase in household bills over the same period. To mitigate

its debt, Southern Water is planning large-scale investment in the Havant Thicket reservoir, which would introduce recycled waste water into a spring-fed drinking water supply through a process called reverse osmosis. The process has never been used for drinking water in the UK before, and is typically found in severely water-stressed landlocked countries. Although the south-east has been designated officially as water-stressed, and we need to see reform to reduce abstraction on rivers such as the Ems, smaller and more environmentally sustainable solutions are available, but they are not being explored, because they cannot be offset against the company's debt.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): On the water-stress levels in Southern Water—our constituencies share the same water provider—it is worth acknowledging that a fifth of water is lost to leaks. We have just heard that Southern Water is in discussions with a company in Norway potentially to provide water to be tanked over here from Norwegian fjords to deal with future droughts and water shortages. Over a long period, that is an absolute failure to plan, to invest in infrastructure and to provide reservoirs such as the one we are speaking about. It is clearly a failure of regulation as well.

Jess Brown-Fuller: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that we should invest in fixing our existing infrastructure, rather than shipping over large quantities of water, which I am sure is not financially stable.

A company outside the water industry operating in that manner would not be able to get away with it, so why can Southern Water and other water companies? The development of the Havant Thicket would affect not only my constituency, but 18 constituencies across the south of England. Furthermore, it will create a national blueprint for all water companies. The project will cost a staggering £1.2 billion, without any comparable investment in waste-water management, which is sorely needed.

To be clear, I am not opposed to new reservoirs. Portsmouth Water is bringing forward the first reservoir that this country has delivered in 30 years. While public confidence in water companies and the methodology of investment is at an all-time low, however, it is hard to have faith that that company will deliver the project without an impact on residents' water bills in future. Southern Water's plan to invest in a huge experimental project as a way to offset its debt is not a sustainable financial model.

Few scandals illustrate the failure of the previous Government as clearly as the state of our rivers and seas. With 3.6 million hours of sewage dumping recorded last year, the system is rigged. It is time to transform this irresponsible industry into an accountable service that truly delivers for the public and the environment.

3.9 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): We have talked about how disgusting, and what a public health issue it is to have sewage and other pollution pouring into our rivers, but I want to touch on the ecological damage. In Winchester, a chalk stream, the River Itchen, goes right through the heart of the city. Chalk streams are very rare, with fewer than 210 of them in the entire world, and 85% of them are in southern England.

Many of them are designated sites of special scientific interest because their ecosystems and biodiversity are unique. I found out recently that the type of Atlantic salmon found in southern chalk streams are genetically distinct from Atlantic salmon in the rest of the world. Chalk streams have taken millions of years to form, and they can be destroyed in just a few decades by companies that are either breaking the law or working within the law but, because there is such a lack of regulation, causing great environmental damage. That is bad for public health, consumers, prices and the environment.

In my constituency, it is frustratingly clear that Southern Water, which is 82% owned by an Australian investment firm, has been prioritising profit over pollution prevention. It is that simple.

Jeremy Corbyn: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the problem is exacerbated by over-abstraction upstream, particularly in chalk streams, which to survive environmentally need water flowing through them throughout the year? Many chalk streams are completely dry for some summer months, and that destroys all fish and all ecological sustainability.

Dr Chambers: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point: it is not simply pollution, but the over-extraction of those environments that is horrendously damaging to chalk streams.

The Liberal Democrats have long been calling for reform to water companies so that they have environmental experts on their boards to ensure they meet their minimum environmental standards before they are allowed to make profits. Putting social and environmental good at the heart of what they do is absolutely necessary to ensure that we are not still talking about how we are struggling with pollution, leaks and a lack of investment in 30 years' time.

Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Mr Pritchard. Protecting our natural environment is one of the top priorities for probably all our constituents.

3.12 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing this debate.

My constituency of Wokingham contains the Thames, the Loddon, the Emm brook and the Ashridge stream—rivers of varying size but equal beauty. The basic role of a Government is to keep their citizens safe and healthy, and protect the environment for future generations, yet the previous Government's deference to corporate greed ahead of our waterways will remain a stain on their legacy for a long time.

The Rivers Trust put it clearly in its research:

"No single stretch of river"

in Wokingham

"is in good overall health."

That is a real scandal.

The Conservatives utterly failed: they were unable to get a grip of this issue and allowed the scandal to persist. They provided no accountability or scrutiny to Ofwat—a regulator that has simply not held the worst polluters to account. Meanwhile, as my hon. Friend said, the water

[Clive Jones]

companies have paid out dividends of £78 billion, and yet our rivers are in the worst state they have been in for many years.

I welcome the announcement earlier today of a review of water companies, but I remind the Minister that voters in Wokingham and across the country voted for change on 4 July. The review must reflect that; it cannot be business as usual for water companies. My constituents and many others across the country will not accept massively increased bills to bail out water companies that are paying massive dividends to their shareholders.

3.14 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing this debate on something I know matters to a great many of my own constituents in Chesham and Amersham. The appalling examples of sewage-filled floodwater blighting lives in my constituency are part of a much bigger picture: a water industry that is not held to account by a regulatory system that is not fit for purpose. I therefore welcome today's announcement of the independent water commission.

As a report published last year by Surfers Against Sewage states, part of the problem is the “severe budget cuts” that regulators have experienced, which have meant that even reported pollution events go uninvestigated and unpunished. Indeed, in 2022, the Environment Agency instructed its staff to ignore reports of low-impact pollution events as it did not have sufficient resources to investigate them. To the extent that that is the case, we get the environment we pay for—but that is only part of the problem. A report published by the previous Government in May this year makes clear that regulators must avoid drifting into unnecessary risk aversion. Internal culture should challenge excessive risk aversion, not promote it. One former employee of the Environment Agency described to me how some of those the agency regulates see it as a toothless tiger.

I suggest to the Minister that fixing the regulatory framework is not the only area worth looking at. There is also a need to make sure we are not creating more problems with our sewage system in the future. At present, our water companies are not statutory consultees on planning applications. Instead of asking whether the existing sewage infrastructure can support new developments, the right to connect means that water companies are required to make it work after the fact. That is surely nonsensical and something the Government can address as part of the work they are currently doing on the national planning policy framework.

I will close by thanking the many campaigners in Chesham and Amersham, including the River Chess Association, the Chiltern Society, Misbourne River Action and others, that have worked tirelessly on this issue. I pay particular tribute to local parish councillors who have found themselves at the forefront of these issues, becoming citizen scientists and experts in a way they never expected. I have been so impressed by their diligence and their dedication to doing their best to help their residents. However, they are volunteers committed to

their environment and their communities; they should not be responsible for holding the water industry to account. That is what our regulators are for.

3.17 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing this critically important debate. In my Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage, over 90% of water infrastructure is managed by Thames Water—a de facto monopoly. The constituency impacts of the current arrangements are stark. In south Oxfordshire, sewage from storm overflows into water bodies exceeded 11,000 hours in 2023 during 810 spills. Recently, in East Hanney and Didcot, overwhelmed sewage pumps have led to flooding, including with contaminated water.

Thames Water was the worst performer in the country for leaks, leaking 570.4 megalitres a day last year, or more than 200 billion litres in total, equivalent to just under a quarter of its entire water supply. Analysts estimate that Thames Water's current debt amounts to about 80% of the value of its business, making it the most heavily indebted of the water companies in England and Wales. At the same time, Thames Water has said that its bills need to rise by 59% between 2025 and 2030 or it will not be able to recover from its financial crisis.

It is in that context that proposals for a reservoir in my constituency are causing concern to local residents. Even putting to one side the fact that many are sceptical of the case for the reservoir, there is concern about whether Thames Water can be trusted to competently programme, manage and deliver what would be the second largest reservoir in the country and one of the largest civil engineering projects in the land.

Mr Charters: Since 2020, £41 million in executive bonuses has been paid out by companies such as Thames Water. That is a disgrace that the Conservatives allowed to happen. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that change is needed to stop companies such as Thames Water paying such ridiculous bonuses when their house is clearly not in order?

Olly Glover: The hon. Member has anticipated the next line of my remarks: that it is time for change on bonuses and many other aspects of the current workings of the water industry.

I am pleased to see the Government initiating today an independent review of the water sector, including the question of regulation, but I hope that they will also consider some bold Liberal Democrat ideas, such as setting legally binding targets to prevent sewage dumping in bathing waters and highly sensitive nature sites by 2030, giving local environmental groups a place on water company boards, and introducing a single social tariff for water bills to help to eliminate water poverty in the course of this and future Parliaments.

Thank you, Mr Pritchard, for the opportunity to speak. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

3.20 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. Clean water is a fundamental human right, so the exploitation

by our water companies at the expense of the British taxpayer is deeply offensive to me and to my South Cotswolds constituents. It adds insult to injury that the same companies now expect taxpayers to foot the bill for improvements they should have prioritised over CEO bonuses and shareholder dividends. Since privatisation, shareholders have extracted a staggering £85 billion from the water and sewerage system in England and Wales. In my constituency, where the River Thames rises, Thames Water pumped sewage into the River Coln in Fairford for 3,391 hours—the equivalent of four and a half months—in 2022. Incidents that are meant to be exceptional happen on average more than three times a week. Dog walkers no longer feel comfortable walking their dogs along the riverbanks after one dog jumped into the water, got sick and died two days later. Across the constituency, sewage is flooding into houses and gardens and schools. That is simply unacceptable.

We need an ambitious, long-term, financially and environmentally responsible vision for our water industry as an essential—literally vital—public good, and that vision must be orientated towards good, clean water. Back in 2013, I was campaigning for the London super-sewer, paddling around under Putney bridge and looking appalled at the tampons and other solid waste coming out of an overflow under the bridge. It has taken more than 11 years to open even the first section of the London super-sewer. The best time to fix this crisis would have been 30 years ago, but the second-best time is now.

I am not letting water companies off the hook for a moment, but I would like to say that the vision must embody a holistic approach to water management. Housing developers can capture rainwater to reduce run-off. Farmers have a key role to play in keeping agricultural contaminants out of our rivers. We need action to stop forever chemicals from plastics and pharmaceuticals getting into our rivers and streams.

In short, we need to stop the incessant pollution of our natural world. Water connects everything. Clean water nourishes all life, while dirty water pollutes everything it touches—from otters, kingfishers and crayfish to our pets and ourselves. We need to put nature back at the heart of our decision making, as called for in my Climate and Nature Bill. The Liberal Democrats propose transforming water companies into public benefit companies—no more excessive bonuses and no more prioritising shareholders over customers. We would also like to see local environmental groups given a voice on water company boards. Some countries have even granted legal personhood to rivers, including the Whanganui river in New Zealand, the Atrato river in Colombia and the Magpie river in Canada. Potentially, we could have a person representing the river itself sitting on a corporate board.

The time is now to take bold steps to improve water company governance, invest in our infrastructure and protect our precious water resources for generations to come.

3.24 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. First, I thank my friend the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for tabling this debate.

I think it is fair to start my contribution by also welcoming the Labour Government's statement today in the House. It is certainly a step in the right direction, and we should welcome it and the objectives behind it. The Minister will be glad to know that I am going to give a Northern Ireland perspective. She has no responsibility for Northern Ireland, so I require no response from her, but I make the point anyway, because what has happened in Northern Ireland is very similar to what is happening to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, and I want to make that comment for *Hansard*.

In Northern Ireland, we have a very different system. Northern Ireland Water is actually a Government-owned company. Though we have a different system, we have the same issues. The Government-owned company says it does not have enough funding and needs a massive uplift to function. Measuring the funding needed to bring things up to scratch feels like turning a tap on—it just seems to run forever and we are never sure we can get to the end of it.

Where are we with this issue in Northern Ireland, and why is it important that we in Northern Ireland unfortunately share the problems that have been identified in this debate? The water and sewerage network in Northern Ireland needs some £1.2 billion in capital investment; that cannot be achieved in the short term. We have approached the Government—though that is a debate for a different day—on Barnett consequential to ensure that we get the same funding equation as they do in Wales, for example, which would give us extra money to identify the issues. The Department for Infrastructure has indicated that some half a billion pounds has to be found for 2024-25. That is a big target.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale underlined the issues. Northern Ireland Water reported a £185 million shortfall in funding. Some 19,000 new properties, or nearly 50% of all applications, have not been connected to the main sewer system, which means that development companies and housing associations have to find the money to do that themselves.

What really annoys me is the large bonuses and the dividends for shareholders. I believe them to be obscene and immoral. The failures of water companies to deliver a reasonable service must be highlighted in this debate. It is important that we understand the nature of this debate and how it affects devolved matters, for different reasons and with different accountability.

The news that United Utilities repeatedly dumped millions of litres of raw sewage into Lake Windermere illegally is shocking, yet we are not really surprised. Only 31% of surface waters in Northern Ireland are classed as having good ecological status. That may be better than in some parts of England, but it is still not good enough.

We must tighten controls, but we must also try to ensure better value for money, as it is clear that the way things are in our water services throughout this great nation cannot continue much longer. When the Minister responds, I ask her for cognisance of the need for a UK-wide solution that includes the devolved nations. When there is crisis and that crisis is developing, it is important to find a solution. We take our clean water for granted in the UK, but we may not be able to do so for much longer unless we give this issue the priority it deserves. That must start today, in this House.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): As the Opposition Front Benchers will know, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson and shadow Minister will get five minutes each and the Minister will get 10 minutes. The debate is due to finish at 4 pm; we were going to put a time limit on speeches, but some Members have left this debate early and some did not speak as long as expected. If Members who have not spoken want to make a brief intervention, you can do so over the next few minutes, but I ask you to please be brief. I think that is fair, given that I hinted at a voluntary time limit and that the debate has been well attended.

3.29 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I am honoured to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for letting me wrap up this debate, and I thank all the speakers who spoke so well and eloquently about the places they represent and love.

I am the Liberal Democrat MP for Witney and a West Oxfordshire district councillor. Our area is a ground zero for pollution. The Windrush flows through Witney, the Evenlode flows through to the north, and Shill brook flows to the south. All flow into the Thames. All are repeatedly and heavily polluted. I work closely with Windrush Against Sewage Pollution, one of the best advocacy groups in the country, to get to grips with this problem. I have learned a lot from that group and from many of the other parish councils and community groups that work so hard locally, and I am grateful for everything they have taught me.

I will focus on financial stability, or the lack thereof, and on Thames Water, as it is the largest and the most unstable of the water companies. First, I will give some context. Thames Water has six holding companies stacked one on top of the other. Some of them are offshore; some are onshore. The top holding company, Kemble, has £1.2 billion of operating cash flows—that is, money coming in—and £18 billion of debt. Roughly £13 billion of the £18 billion is held by class-A bondholders, and Members will hear a bit more about them. This debt is expensive, and more than a third of all our customers' bills are being spent on servicing the debt.

In July, S&P and Moody's cut the credit ratings of the class-A bonds to junk and two notches below that. That action put the company in breach of its operating licence. Ofwat waved some limp celery at Thames Water and did very little. That opens up moral hazard because it means that other water companies and other companies in regulated sectors can do the same. On 5 August, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), stated in reply to my written question that Thames Water's financial position "remains stable".

In early September, it became public that various funds, including the notorious Elliott Management, which pillaged Argentina and Peru, had bought large amounts of class-A debt at very discounted prices. On 13 September, the Under-Secretary of State replied to me again, saying that Thames Water "remains stable". She noted that special administration was an option if any of three conditions were met, with one of the conditions being if

"the company is or is likely to be unable to pay its debts"

—pretty simple. On 26 September, both S&P and Moody's slashed Thames Water's class-A debt again. It was already two notches below junk; this time it went down a further five and six notches respectively. The words "death spiral" spring to mind.

A week ago, it was reported that Ofwat is meeting a creditor group representing the class-A shareholders to discuss restructuring the company's debt. The condition that

"the company is or is likely to be unable to pay its debts"

has most definitely been met. The company's cash burn is faster than previously forecast, and the company as is will likely run out of cash by December. Its class-A bondholders are desperate to avoid special administration as that would crystallise their loss and result in much of their debt being written off. However, the creditors are now negotiating with Ofwat to inject a relatively small amount of new capital in, cram down the other debt classes, resulting in perhaps a 20% to 30% debt write-down, flip some of their debt into equity, and then sell the company on to another buyer within 12 months, making a huge profit.

If the Government allow such a restructuring, they are effectively rescuing a group of lenders, including vulture funds, not the company. Instead of the bondholders having to write off billions of pounds of worthless debts, the Government will be giving ownership of the company to the vulture funds, which will then flip it at a profit. Such a route is neither sensible nor equitable for the company, the Government or our country. It is a lazy, short-term fix from which the Government can repent at leisure over the course of the parliamentary term. No one will be fooled by the Government claiming that in the short-term the market has fixed it, and no one should be panicked by bankers claiming Armageddon but, in reality, just driving their own agenda.

The special administration regime was set up for exactly this scenario. The Government should make use of it and place Thames Water into special administration, allowing for an orderly restructuring and reorganisation resulting in the sale of a clean company on the open market; whether that is nationally, mutually or privately is, of course, up to the Government, but that will allow a clean company to be in place. To be investable again as a sector, we need a clear regulatory framework that is transparent and enforceable against, where companies that make bad decisions know they will have to take the consequences. That will allow investors to fund water companies' balance sheets so they can handle the very substantial investment spend that will be required over the next 10 years.

3.35 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing this important debate.

As has been acknowledged by all hon. Members, the UK's waterways are the country's lifeblood. When they are in a good condition, it is beneficial not only for the environment, but for public health. It is also crucial for biodiversity and local communities that rely on the waterways—not only for recreational purposes, but for tourism.

The last Government were determined to take a positive stance on improving water quality. To do that, however, we needed to understand the situation that water companies were in. That is why we specifically focused on increasing the monitoring of outfalls from the start, taking a monitoring rate for storm overflows from 7% in 2010 under the last Labour Administration to 100% at the end of 2023. In March 2024, we fast-tracked £180 million of investment that had to be allocated within the last financial year by water companies, with an expected reduction of 8,000 sewage spills in English waterways. We also linked shareholder dividends to environmental performance, quadrupled water company inspections and launched a whistleblowing portal for water company workers to report breaches.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Does the shadow Minister not feel embarrassed that it was his Government who beggared the Environment Agency and weakened regulators to the point where we had sewage flowing into rivers such as the Tyne and the Coquet in Northumberland? Does he not feel a little bit of guilt about trumpeting his Government's apparently positive record?

Robbie Moore: I thank the hon. Gentleman for joining the debate; I see that he came in right at the last minute just to make that contribution.

My answer is no. When we were in Government, we absolutely wanted to embolden the regulators with as much power as they required, which is why we specifically linked dividends to environmental performance so that Ofwat had more power to hold water companies to account. Not only that: we increased the amount of funding allocated to the Environment Agency and empowered the whistleblowing portal so that employees within water companies, or indeed within the EA or any of the other regulators, could make their concerns known. In that way, we as the Government—and now the incoming Government—could make proper progress and ensure that proper, positive change was implemented to improve water quality.

The financial stability of the water companies is, of course, a serious issue, and that affects our constituents through not only potential price increases, but performance-related issues. Sensibly, Ofwat expects water companies to maintain a level of financial headroom to manage short-term volatility and shocks to their financial structures, and to meet their obligations and commitments, which are set both by Government and internally by the regulator. Above all else, however, consumers must be protected so I welcome the fact that Ofwat strengthened its powers to improve financial resilience. That includes stopping water companies from paying dividends when financial resilience is also at risk.

The new Government have said that cleaning up England's rivers, lakes and seas is a priority and to achieve that the Water (Special Measures) Bill has been introduced through the House of Lords into Parliament. Perhaps I should not have been so surprised that that is effectively a reworked version of the policies introduced under the last Government. In the Bill, the Government pledge to introduce new powers to block bonuses for executives of water companies that pollute our waterways—something announced by the last Conservative Government. However, the powers are not quite the promises constantly regurgitated by the Labour party when they were out on the doorstep—

they were telling many of their voters that water company bosses would end up “in the dock” if their water company had been falling foul of environmental permitting obligations. The Water (Special Measures) Bill simply does not achieve that. By introducing the Bill, the new Government have frustrated not only campaigners but investors who want to invest in the sector.

Opposition Members spent many a day out on the doorstep also promising that they would take swift and bold action, but as we have seen from today's announcement of a new commission, a new review and a new taskforce, the Government are just throwing the hard decisions into the long grass and simply kicking the can down the road.

Mr Charters: Does the hon. Member not welcome the Government's appointment of former deputy governor of the Bank of England Jon Cunliffe? He had that expertise as deputy governor in financial stability. Does the hon. Gentleman not think that we need to look again at the whole system when it comes to the financial instability of water companies that he and his colleagues left behind?

Robbie Moore: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I absolutely welcome anything that will improve the water sector. When I was a Minister in the Department, many issues needed to be addressed. I noticed that the hon. Gentleman commented in his speech that the Minister was working at pace, but the review will take at least a year to implement. I want to ask the Minister, as I did the Secretary of State in the House earlier: when will the positive recommendations from the review be implemented? We know that we are entering price review 2024, which exists from 2025 to 2030, but when is the industry likely to see any positive implications of the results of the commission that has been instigated today?

The Government have also confirmed that they will work with farmers to reduce agricultural pollution. I understand that Ministers have said that that will be through a series of

“proportionate and effective regulations, advice and incentives to deliver improvements”.

Can the Minister clarify how that will roll out? What new regulations does the Department anticipate bringing in? The farming budget is rumoured to be slashed by at least £100 million, so how will the Government incentivise farmers through public money to do the right thing in reducing run-off from fields and from their agricultural activities?

Will the Minister also outline whether any regulatory easement will be applied to water companies going forward? Many Members have raised concerns to do with Thames Water and the like, but I would like to specifically understand whether the Minister, her colleagues or the Secretary of State are looking at implementing a regulatory easement, as the Opposition would not want to see lower standards, the relaxation of environmental permits or a reduction in agreed levels of investment by any water company, irrespective of their financial circumstances.

Sound management of water companies is vital if customers are to receive the high level of service that they expect, and better environmental performance must be driven forward.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the Minister, I should say that I allowed the Front Benchers to speak a little longer given that we have some time. If the Minister wishes to take interventions, she can, although she does not have to. I remind her that if she so chooses she can give time at the end—just a couple of minutes—to the mover of the motion Tim Farron.

Before I call the Minister, I hope that the hon. Member for Hexham will forgive my mentioning that it is a procedure of the House—a courtesy—to be in the whole debate and not come in after 65 minutes of a 90-minute debate and then make an intervention. It is not really the way to add to a debate or get the most out of it. I am sure he will take note of that. I call the Minister.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing this debate. I will make sure he has time to sum up at the end.

In response to the shadow Minister, I think the Government's record speaks for itself. Although he might wish to rewrite history, he cannot actually change history. If people want to see what his Government achieved, they just need to look at a storm overflow pipe or perhaps the level of pollution in every river, lake and sea. The public outrage and outcry over this issue is felt by everybody. It is certainly felt by this Government.

The level of pollution in our iconic lakes such as Windermere and in our beautiful chalk streams—we have had debates on this before—is outrageous. It is right that that has become more of an issue as time has gone on. That is a positive thing. We need to value our nature to a far higher level than we ever did before, and change is needed. Indeed, we were elected on a mandate to bring about that change. I am pleased that climate change was mentioned in the debate as well. Our problems will only increase because of our changing climate. Everywhere will perhaps not be quite as wet as the constituency of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, but places will certainly be getting to those kinds of levels.

I pay tribute to all the campaign groups and organisations that have come to meet me since I became the Minister with this responsibility. Those people are incredibly passionate and dedicated, often citizen scientists giving their spare time to work on this issue, because they passionately believe in it.

I must mention the wonderful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), the quietly spoken radical. I welcome his support for the Water (Special Measures) Bill. Never let his quiet ways lead to underestimating the secret radicalness within him. I hope that he will contribute to the water review and the consultation. We will welcome his expertise.

I pay tribute to a fantastic new Member, my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters), who is a brilliant local champion. I value his contribution and I share his outrage at the levels of sewage he has seen in his constituency. I agree with the very good point he made: when we look at the consultation, we should look at other regulatory systems to see what

works well and at what lessons can be learned, so that we create a system that is effective for the future. I hope that that is something that he, too, feeds into the consultation.

The Water (Special Measures) Bill has been mentioned a number of times. Before it comes to this House, I will organise drop-in sessions for Members of Parliament, who are welcome to talk to me about possible amendments and things that they would like to see in the Bill. I am happy to discuss that. I will of course make time for all the Front-Bench spokespeople to talk to me about it, too.

I have to say, however, that I was rather surprised to hear criticism by Members of Parliament of the idea of inclusion, of consultation with our commission. This Government believe in doing things with people and not to people. I will go so far as to say that the Government are not arrogant enough to believe themselves to have all the answers and expertise, especially with so many experts out there. The Government want to reset our water industry for decades to come and—this is in my DNA and is stated on the back of my Labour party membership card—we believe

“that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone”.

This is my philosophy of working with other people—looking at systems of co-production, at how we can create consensus, and at bringing together different ideas and expertise. I was therefore a bit surprised to hear that the idea of consultation and including others should be ignored. In fact, the previous Government had many examples of being arrogant enough to presume that they knew all the answers. Indeed, that Government created systems and policies that have been found to be utterly failing, because they did not listen to what the general public or campaigners were saying.

There is little point to different Members of Parliament talking about how they value the contribution of campaigners and organisations—how welcome those are and how well they have worked with them—when they also say that the ideas and expertise of those campaigners and other people should not contribute to Government policy. Deeds, not words—if we value people's expertise and contribution, we must let them work with us to shape legislation for the future.

This commission will work with those experts, will value their contributions and listen to them, and will shape something that is fit for the future. It will conclude in June and, after a couple of months of looking at the consultation and Government response, further legislation will be brought forward. Some things will need primary legislation to change, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), understands, but some things can be done more quickly. That very much depends on the recommendations. If primary legislation is required, obviously such things will take longer.

An important point to make is that the Government want to do things in a different and inclusive way. I reach out to each and every one of the people in this Chamber to say: “We want to do this with you.” Yes, there will be different points of view across the Chamber and there will be different ideas about what the right answer is, but let us act collectively on this, not just as Members of Parliament across the House, but as campaigners,

organisations and members of all groups, even my mum's wild swimming group—I am sure they have many an opinion on what the right policy should be. Let us come together to create something meaningful that will command cross-party support and make a difference. That is what we want from this consultation. I will be honest: I am a bit disappointed that people think consulting and working with others is a bad idea.

While I am having a slight moan about things that are slightly disappointing, there seems to be a confused message coming from the Chamber. Members have highlighted that some of the drought plans for water companies are rather, shall we say, extreme, as they involve shipping water over from other countries to deal with droughts, but they also criticised building reservoirs. They cannot do both. If we are going to plan for droughts, we need to talk about building reservoirs and ensure we have the infrastructure we need for the future.

What have the Government been doing? In week one, we got all the CEOs together in a room and talked to them about how we fix the industry. From that meeting, we secured a change to the articles of association, ringfenced funding for vital infrastructure, and new customer panels, and strengthened the protection and compensation for householders. In the week after the summer recess, we introduced the Water (Special Measures) Bill, so in our first 100 days we have hardly been resting on our laurels.

A lot has been said about the independent commission. It is really important that it is independent, and I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer paid tribute to Sir Jon Cunliffe, whose expertise and financial record are second to none, so is somebody we can work with collectively to produce something really effective.

Robbie Moore: On the commission, would the Minister be kind enough to outline to the House the timings? The PR24 process, which Ofwat is looking at, comes into effect next year and will be in place until 2029-30. Will any positive recommendations from the commission take effect within that price review period?

Emma Hardy: The shadow Minister is pointing out the way we plan and look at our five-year cycle. Whether that is the best way of doing things is a whole other question. The answer is the one I gave earlier: it very much depends on whether things need primary legislation. Some things that change the regulator will not affect the price review framework. The price review framework is based on the amount of money that people will invest in infrastructure, and changes needed for the next five years. That does not mean that things relating to regulation and the rules cannot be changed. I am sure he understands that.

I reiterate the Government's commitment to driving meaningful, long-term improvements in the performance and culture of the water industry. We want to deliver on our ambition to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas, and the actions I have outlined today are only the beginning. I am passionate about this issue, and am very pleased to be leading on it. In fact, I asked to become the Minister for it, and we do not always get what we ask for in politics. I reiterate my invitation to work with each and every Member here. I think consultation and collaboration are good things, and I hope all hon. Members will

embrace that. I look forward to working with them to achieve the goal that we all share: cleaner rivers, lakes and seas.

3.53 pm

Tim Farron: I see I have seven minutes—I will do my best not to use them all.

I first want to reiterate something I said at the very beginning of my opening remarks: I genuinely pay tribute to the people who work on the ground for the water companies—it is United Utilities in my neck of the woods—Ofwat and the EA. I think these debates can sometimes sound quite toxic to them. They work hard doing an important job, and they are victims of a system that it is vital we change. I am delighted that others have said the same thing today. I just want to put that on the record—particularly in relation to my local community.

I thank colleagues from all sides for their excellent contributions. They are people who are passionate about their own communities, the waterways in their communities and the voluntary groups working within their communities that are helping to highlight these issues.

I also thank the Front-Bench speakers—the Minister and the Conservative spokesman, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), but especially my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), who made an absolutely fantastic contribution. His expertise is something we very much value; the people of Witney are lucky to have him and we are lucky to have him, too.

I will just reflect briefly on the Minister's comments. I count her as a friend and respect her very much indeed. What she said about collaboration is absolutely right. However, I will make the observation—a relatively neutral observation—that the Labour manifesto was pretty thin across the board. I understand why that was. Maybe for the last two or three years they felt it was their election to lose and therefore the more information they put out there, the more chance they had of maybe throwing it all away. I do understand the politics. However, that does not really justify waiting several months to begin the process of taking action. So, a Government can be collaborative and consult, and take radical action early on. Nevertheless, I took her point and she defended the Government's position and process on this issue very well.

Our view is simply that we will be and should be a constructive Opposition; we will challenge and we will seek to be constructive as we do so. But I will also say that we are encouraged—at least cautiously—by what we have heard today from both the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Minister herself.

Since I have time left, I will ask one extra thing. It is important that we tackle this issue from a national perspective, but there is also an issue in my local area that I think we can fix. Windermere receives an awful lot of coverage and rightly so. A fifth of the pollution in Windermere comes from septic tanks, including 89 package treatment works around the lakes, all of which could be relatively easily connected to the mains. I wonder whether the Minister would agree to meet me, United Utilities and representatives of the tourism and hospitality industry to see whether we could make that migration, up the standards and do something genuinely useful at the bottom level to improve the water quality of Windermere.

[Tim Farron]

Emma Hardy *rose—*

Tim Farron: If the Minister wants to say, “Yes”, she will meet me, I will be delighted to give way to her.

Emma Hardy: In the spirit of collaboration, which I have just spoken so much about, of course I will meet the hon. Member.

Tim Farron: Mr Pritchard, she’s a good ‘un. I thank the Minister very much indeed; I appreciate that.

Finally, I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate, but I also thank you, Mr Pritchard. That might sound a bit smarmy, but you and I go back a long way. I wish that when I first started here I had a Chair of Westminster Hall debates who talked us through the process as well as you have today. I am very grateful to you, and indeed to everybody else who has been here for this debate.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): You will definitely be called first in the next debate, that’s for sure. [*Laughter.*] You have been here a long time; you know how to work the system. So, there we are. No—there is no system to work; we are neutral in the Chair. But thank you for your kind comments.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the regulation and financial stability of water companies.

3.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

Fusion Energy

4 pm

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of fusion energy.

I want to begin by thanking the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for meeting me last week to discuss this priority issue.

When I stood to be Member of Parliament for Bassetlaw, my commitment to my constituents was to work with others to raise aspirations and generate new opportunities for our young people, so that they no longer have to move away to get a highly skilled job or one that gives them a strong financial future. The STEP—spherical tokamak for energy production—programme provides such an opportunity, and it is my responsibility to do whatever it takes to support the process and ensure a strong economic future for an area that is now consistently described as post-industrial.

Bassetlaw first made international history when the Mayflower pilgrims set foot on the Plymouth Rock and signed what became the American constitution. Four hundred years on, Bassetlaw will make headlines again, after the UK Atomic Energy Authority determined that West Burton, a coal-burning power station currently being decommissioned, will be the site of the first fusion energy prototype plant. This historic decision very much aligns with Bassetlaw’s coalmining heritage. We had seven pits producing coal, taken by local train drivers to power stations including Cottam, West Burton and High Marnham, built alongside the River Trent. We had a workforce proudly geared towards powering the country.

A heritage that was in decline is now providing new opportunities for green energy production. We have good local infrastructure, with railway lines holding the potential to be the preferred route on to the site for goods, construction traffic and workers. Existing licences for water extraction on the River Trent and, most significantly, the connection to the national grid were core factors in the decision-making process for the preferred site.

Even more important was the local public support for a fusion plant. At consultation events run by the local ward councillor, my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish), we were told in the no-nonsense way of north Nottinghamshire that it is common sense to retain an energy generation site for future green energy production. The public went further, calling for the other decommissioned power plants to be reused in similar ways. Those positive factors all contributed to the UKAEA’s decision making, and in December 2020 West Burton was selected as the future home of the spherical tokamak for energy production.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this debate forward. In the spirit of positivity and looking forward, is she aware that there are currently no power plants in Northern Ireland and that the Republic of Ireland banned all nuclear power generation in 1999? However, the UK and the US have announced a partnership to accelerate fusion energy, which she referred to. Does she agree that more consideration must be given to extending nuclear facilities

and capabilities to the rest of the United Kingdom to ensure that we can all accelerate the fusion energy that she is promoting so well?

Jo White: The focus has to be getting fusion working at West Burton. Should it be successful, it has to be rolled out over the whole of the UK, and Northern Ireland must be a key element of that.

STEP is a Government-funded industry partnership to develop the most advanced tokamak fusion reactor in the world. The outline business case for the STEP programme was approved in 2023, with a full business case to be submitted next year. In November, we will see the launch of the procurement process for whole-plant partners—the major engineering and construction partners that will get the project moving. The intention is to get formal approval for the next four-year phase of development in March, when the proposal passes on to the major projects review group and then the Chief Secretary.

Fusion has been defined as “last energy”—the recreation of the energy generated by the sun and all other stars, in which atomic nuclei collide and release energy. The goal is to produce an inexhaustible source of low-carbon energy and heat, with the objective of supplying electricity into the national grid by the 2040s. We as a Government need to be thinking already about our 2030 ambitions, with fusion taking us into the next and crucial phase of carbon-neutral energy production. That is not just my view: industry experts say that fusion is the solution to meeting the growing long-term global demand for clean energy and holds the potential to be the baseload energy source. The key is that it will be developed by UK industries and then distributed across the world.

I welcome our mission to rebuild wealth through investing in Great British Energy, which is being kicked off across the country—that is game changing, rebuilding our economy and creating wealth through investment in carbon-neutral energy production—but we also need to think about where these ambitions need to take us. The development of fusion power plants will see the creation of new technologies and an energy capacity that will go further than energy generation, including the production of superconducting magnets, hydrogen and a new generation of medical advances for cancer treatment. We are the world leaders in the development of fusion, but the race is on, with the US and China rapidly developing competing technologies and key supply chain industries.

Can the Minister confirm that it is the Government’s intention to ensure that the UK and British industry lead the world on fusion? For the sake of our industrial prospects, job creation and wealth generation, we cannot afford to take our eye off the ball and come in second, third or fourth. Our fusion ambitions cannot be put on the back burner for an undetermined future Government agenda. Fusion power offers the prospect of an almost inexhaustible source of energy for future generations, and we have a responsibility to pursue that agenda today, not tomorrow. It is no use being today’s world leader on fusion if the skills gap widens over the next decade and the best and brightest young minds head to other countries to develop fusion, or if we as a Government dither and prevaricate about making the investment now.

We need to encourage our pupils, students and those already in work to choose a career in fusion and to do so in the UK. We need the Government, the fusion

sector, its supply chain and academia to work together to understand the skills and disciplines needed in fusion and to communicate the opportunities. I want to see laboratory technicians and researchers, the best brains from across the country and the world, in our UK labs, and I want the Government to make fusion a No. 1 priority to attract the best global talent.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): My hon. Friend knows what I think about this topic as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fusion energy. I want to highlight the fusion cluster of 200 businesses at Culham, which she has visited. Does she agree that that is a fantastic site and that Ministers should join us on a visit?

Jo White: I very much agree. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East has already been, and I would love for the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), to go too. I want to see what we have at Culham reproduced at West Burton. It is the first step, and it gives us the vision for what could come next.

When we founded the first industrial revolution, it was our red wall areas that led the way, and history is now repeating itself. Do we have the confidence to lead the world on fusion? Do we have the laser focus to make it happen now? Will we have the vision to create the silicon valley of green energy in Nottinghamshire? Although I know the Minister cannot prejudice the outcome of the spending review, will we get the finance from Government to make this whole thing viable? Leaders lead from the front. We have the opportunity—we have the lead. Do we have what it takes to win the gold medal?

We need a coherent training programme and strategy for fusion skills, and a strategic foundation established for UK sector leadership in the decades to come. As the new MP for Bassetlaw, I already have a legacy plan for my constituency. I want to see my young people find routes into fusion, through the supply chains, through the development of new technologies, or through leading the world at the West Burton plant itself. I want to use this unique opportunity to change life outcomes for future generations in Bassetlaw. I want them to be enabled to take all of the advantages through fusion becoming part of the school curriculum and go on to be able to enter the field via vocational or academic training. I want my local businesses to have the opportunities to change their production techniques and provision. They must become key elements of the supply chain. In terms of immediate infrastructure asks, we need commitments for a railway station on site and local road improvements so that we can begin to unlock the full potential of West Burton.

My ambitions are shared by our county council and our new Mayor of the East Midlands, Claire Ward, who sees the potential for the future. We have a shared vision to create a Trent clean energy supercluster, with the West Burton site aligning with three other decommissioned coal-fired power station sites to become the heart of carbon-neutral energy production on a regional scale, with hydrogen, small modular reactors, solar and wind, with 6,000 new construction jobs, 15,500 operational jobs, and a net gross value added gain of £930 million.

The opportunities are cross-regional, stretching into Lincolnshire, Yorkshire and nationwide. I look forward to the continued support and commitment of the

[Jo White]

Government, and to our stepping up to become the international leaders for fusion and ensuring that fusion is integral to our Great British Energy ambitions. I invite the Minister to visit Bassetlaw to see the groundbreaking opportunities, and to cut the ribbon at our new fusion café, built by the UKAEA with the precise intent to inform and attract our young and inquisitive minds for the big challenges ahead.

I am working in partnership with my community, my council, our elected mayor, the UKAEA, my neighbouring MPs, local businesses, the fusion industry, international partners and the Government to deliver STEP, to ensure that we are the clean energy superpower of the future. We will lead the world in the development of fusion.

4.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): It is a pleasure to serve in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Jo White), for securing today's important debate, and for the passionate way in which she spoke about both this issue and her constituency. It was genuinely inspiring—particularly what she said not just about the future of her community but about its heritage. I confess that I did not know the role my hon. Friend's constituency played in the creation of the United States, but, as I used to say to my school pupils, every day is a school day, so I thank her for that.

It would have been quite a striking debate if my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish), the chair of the APPG on fusion energy, had spoken about anything other than his support for fusion, but I welcome his invitation to join his group's visit. I would say to my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw that I think there are other Ministers in the Department who might be slightly frustrated if I cut the ribbon rather than them, but I am happy to do so all the same.

I share my hon. Friends' genuine excitement for this technology, and it is worth taking a moment to think about what we are talking about. The idea that we could produce an almost inexhaustible supply of low-carbon baseload sounds almost too good to be true—particularly as an Energy Minister trying to get us to where we are going to by 2030. It sounds like a fantastic proposition, but after many, many years of a lot of hard work, it is in fact within our grasp.

Fusion creates nearly 4 million times more energy for every kilogram of fuel than burning coal, oil or gas—some of the statistics are staggering, and worth taking a moment to reflect on. It has a huge potential to bolster our energy security and to create thousands of good jobs at the same time, putting it at the heart of not just one of the Prime Minister's key missions in Government but two: kick-starting economic growth and making Britain a clean energy superpower. What is even more exciting is that this country genuinely has an opportunity to lead the world on this and to become the global home of fusion energy, with all the considerable short and long-term economic gains that come with it.

I thank hon. Members for being here and for their support for this new technology. It is difficult at times, with technologies that are perhaps not so well understood and are at that nascent stage, to keep the debate on them.

It is important to have more contributions and speeches like the one we heard about the importance of this technology.

The UK has been at the forefront of fusion energy research and development for more than 40 years, going back to June 1983—I will not tell hon. Members my age, but at that time I was not quite born—in a quiet corner of Oxfordshire, with the world's largest operational fusion reactor. The Joint European Torus went on to break records and then break them again, with thousands of experts from across Europe playing their part in those experiments. JET closed its doors last year and we are now focused on building a whole new generation of fusion facilities in the UK.

Domestically, the economic opportunities of fusion are huge. The sector already supports thousands of jobs, and our ambitions will see it deliver many more highly skilled roles in future. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw outlined, it can also lead to breakthroughs in other areas, particularly in medicine, supercomputing and other green technologies. That is why it is important to attract private sector investment to this project. Some \$7 billion has already been raised by global private fusion companies and that figure grows year on year.

It is clear that the UK's pro-innovation, proportionate approach to fusion regulation is attracting global interest but we want to go further, developing a national policy statement for fusion facilities that provides even greater certainty, encouraging billions more in private investment, driving further growth and supporting thousands more jobs. We are also investing in unique fusion research facilities at UKAEA sites across the country that UK-based firms can access, making it the natural home for fusion development.

Internationally, fusion energy could be transformational, both as a long-term solution to energy security and, in this most decisive of decades, in tackling the climate crisis. This is a low-carbon, safe and abundant source of energy, which does not require huge amounts of land or natural resources for its production. That makes it the perfect power source for nations have relied on imported fossil fuels, or that do not have the capacity to deploy renewables at the scale many will need. Those are the same countries that are most likely to be affected by climate change. In other words, as global energy demand grows—and we know that it will considerably in the decades ahead—fusion energy could be critical to keeping net zero within reach, as well as ensuring that citizens everywhere have access to power.

Other major economies, including the US and China, have realised that there are huge prizes on offer to be the first to commercialise this technology, including economic growth and global environmental leadership. Estimates of that fusion energy market between 2050 and 2100 put it between £3 trillion and £12 trillion. Without the spending power of the US or China, we must be targeted in how we maintain our leadership in this ever-closer international competition. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw outlined, that is where the STEP programme comes in.

Last month, I was privileged to be at Ratcliffe-on-Soar. It might seem odd for a Minister to be privileged to be at the closure of something, but the closure of our last coal-fired power station was a real moment in our energy story—a moment for us to recognise that the

transition is well under way. We are now bringing a whole new industry to that part of the world with the creation of the world's first civil fusion power plant. The aim is for the prototype plant to reach completion by 2040, and that will demonstrate that fusion can be a viable part of our energy mix in the near future. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw is aware, it is a hugely exciting opportunity for local people in her constituency, for the wider region and for the whole UK, delivering thousands of jobs directly and in the supply chain.

My hon. Friend rightly referenced the importance of skills development in fusion energy. There is a real opportunity to develop the skills of a next generation of young people working in the energy of the future. STEP will partner with private industry early on in its journey, working closely with engineering and construction companies. The work of identifying those partners is under way at the moment, with an announcement of the shortlisted bidders due in the following weeks. This is about not only maximising our chances of success, but utilising the local skills already in my hon. Friend's community to breathe new life into an industrial heartland.

At the same time, we will establish a strong fusion skills base and domestic supply chain to support STEP and enable it to compete globally. We are also running an outreach programme to schools in the area to encourage the uptake of fusion-related education, and developing relationships and grants with universities. We want fusion to be a sector that excites and inspires young people, and now is an important moment to unlock that potential.

STEP is a first-of-a-kind programme, and there will, of course, be challenges. My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw mentioned a number of the logistical challenges in the local area—we will work through

those things together with the local community, and I know that she was involved in the local council for many years as well—but we have a huge advantage: four decades of research, a thriving financial landscape and a world-leading plan, which means that even before a commercially viable plan is delivered, the programme will have already supported thousands of jobs, skilled development and cutting-edge research. Ultimately, whether STEP or a different design is the precise one used to commercialise fusion technology, its development will already ensure that the UK has a supply chain to provide jobs and the recognition that we are in the lead in this technology.

The Government are unashamedly pro-growth, pro-business and pro-innovation, and fusion is a great example of all three. It is such an important part of our plans because it covers all those points, and is a real opportunity for us to make progress and become the global lead in a genuinely transformative technology. That could ensure our energy security, drive huge growth and combat climate change here and far beyond our shores. STEP could, in short, be the UK's Apollo moment, and I cannot wait to see where the fusion journey takes us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw is a passionate and enthusiastic representative of the community driving forward this technology, and it is in safe hands. I pay tribute to her commitment both to championing this technology and to her wider community. Together, we can make this one of the most exciting moments in our energy story.

Question put and agreed to.

4.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

Paternity Leave and Pay

4.30 pm

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered paternity leave and pay.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. My first Westminster Hall debate is being chaired by a neighbouring Member of Parliament. It is a delight to be here.

I know that families come in all shapes and sizes and that paternity leave is not just about fathers. I will refer primarily to dads in my speech, but the points that I will be making relate and apply to all families, of all shapes and sizes. I stand here as a dad, a parent, and an MP who believes that parenthood matters to children, families, employers, the economy and our country.

The UK currently has the worst paternity pay and leave in Europe and among the worst in the OECD. Fathers, if they are eligible—about 20% of them are not—can take a maximum of two weeks' paid leave, at a maximum rate of £184 a week, which is less than half the national living wage. In 2023, 605,000 babies were born in the UK, yet only 195,000 dads received statutory paternity pay. That is less than one father for every three children. If we contrast that with the 52 weeks of maternity leave and 39 weeks of maternity pay, it is clear that our system needs to be updated for the 21st century.

As a father myself, I do have a vested interest in this issue, but better paternity rights are not just good for fathers; they are good for mums and, more importantly, for children. Last week I was able to speak to a number of parents at an event in Parliament with the Dad Shift campaign, and I heard from several dads about the difference that paternity leave—or the lack of it—had made to their relationships with their young children. I want to live in a society in which children can see both parents as caregivers, but for that to happen, it needs to be possible for both parents to be present during the vital early years. Evidence shows that the physical and social bonds that are set so early are critical for babies as they grow up and for the fathers' connection to the children in later life. One dad I heard from at the event in Parliament, Simon, suffered from undiagnosed depression after the birth of his child. That was made worse by not having the time with his child to establish and develop that bond.

This is not the 1950s. We can all agree that most men do want to have relationships with their children, especially during the early years, but the law does not reflect that. Another dad I spoke to, George, had a generous employer who gave him more than the statutory pay and leave, and he spoke glowingly about the difference that that had made to his mental health and wellbeing, but also, of course, the balance in the household and his relationship with his child. It was great to hear that a number of employers were going above and beyond the statutory minimum, but as of 2022, 49% of employers provided the minimum statutory paternity leave.

This matter is simply too important to leave to the whim of individual employers. Change needs to start within Government and the public sector. I recently tabled a number of written questions to Departments, asking how much paternity leave their staff took on

average. The only Department whose staff took more than the 14 days was the Department for Education. If we look at other Departments, the figure was 9.6 days in the Department for Transport and 7.25 days in the Department for Work and Pensions. The Cabinet Office ranked worst, with 5.7 days. The Government and the public sector should be exemplary employers, but instead they are lagging behind some private sector employers. We need as the first step a signal from the Government and from the public sector as a whole that this is something that needs to be improved.

At the Dad Shift event, I heard from mums and dads about the toll that the segregated system had taken on their careers. Making it easier for dads to look after the kids also makes it easier for mums to continue in their workplace—a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) has made so passionately in the Chamber only this week.

It is morally wrong to pressure women into sacrificing their career for their family, and it is also a massive productivity drain. This Government want to restore growth, create jobs and create wealth. The Centre for Progressive Policy estimates that closing the gender employment gap in all UK local authorities could increase economic output by a staggering £23 billion, and the OECD estimates that three quarters of the gender wage gap in northern and western Europe is down to the motherhood penalty.

How many talented women are we losing from the workforce because they cannot get back into work after lengthy maternity leave? How much better off could we be if both parents could take leave that was short enough not to harm their careers but long enough to support their children? Technically, that is already an option after the changes that took place in 2015 with shared parental rights. However, the Government's own analysis found that only 1% of eligible mothers and only 5% of eligible fathers took shared parental leave. I heard from one father, Alex, who told me that the system and process of shared parental leave were so complicated to navigate that he paid a third party £50 to complete the forms for him.

Things are about to get better. I am delighted that the Employment Rights Bill had its Second Reading earlier this week; it will mark a massive step forward on paternity leave and pay, expanding eligibility by introducing day one rights to paternity and parental leave, allowing fathers to take paternity leave after they have taken shared parental leave, and facilitating a full review of all parental leave rights. The Government clearly recognise the importance of the issue and that further steps need to be taken to address it.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on an issue that is clearly important to so many of us. Does he agree that even if the birth of a child has been straightforward and simple, two weeks, and the paternity pay that goes with it, passes very quickly? If there is a complication in the birth—if the mother becomes ill, for example, or if there are other complications for the child—the two weeks disappear in the blink of an eye. Then parents, especially fathers, go back to work, and fathers feel guilty about not being able to be at home to support that type of need.

Shaun Davies: My hon. Friend makes a powerful contribution. My own brother was born three months premature and my father's ability to be there was curtailed by the fact that the paternity leave then was simply not generous enough.

The Employment Rights Bill, which I welcome, goes some way towards addressing the eligibility problem, but there is more that we can do. Research by the Centre for Progressive Policy, Women in Data and Pregnant Then Screwed found that countries with longer paternity leave have lower gender wage gaps and lower gender workforce participation gaps than countries such as our own.

Such leave not only needs to be longer; it also needs to be better paid. In line with statutory paternity pay, there should be 90% of earnings for the following six weeks. It needs to be “use it or lose it” leave—in other words, non-transferrable—to encourage take-up. Fundamentally, the root problem is the assumption that there must always be one primary parent. That scenario will suit some families, but it benefits no one to force that choice on everyone. The campaign for fair parental leave and pay is a campaign to normalise co-parenting.

I am making a number of asks of the Minister. I acknowledge his work on the updating of employment rights across the country; he should be congratulated for that. However, we are able to go further and we must not let the good be the enemy of the great. We must applaud the progress that has been made and affirm that we can go further. I ask him to ask his Department to review the rights around parental leave, so that we can have a conversation about it.

This is the moment for our generation of MPs to drag working practices into the 21st century, for the benefit of dads, mums, society and our country, but most of all for the benefit of our children as they grow up. Let us give British children their dads back. Let us be pro-growth, pro-worker, pro-business, pro-children and—importantly—pro-family.

4.39 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): Like the hon. Member for Telford (Shaun Davies), I recognise that my experience of fatherhood is heteronormative and I appreciate that there are many other forms of families. I will probably end up repeating some of the excellent points put forward by the hon. Member, but since they are very good ones I will not hesitate to repeat them.

My first point is that the paternity system is classist: white-collar workers generally get much better provision from their employers. Some workers get up to six months, if they work in high-demand industries. Contrast that with the provision in precarious industries and the gig economy and for traditional blue-collar workers. They tend to get very little indeed: two weeks' statutory pay or naught if they are self-employed.

Paternity leave is essential to avoid the woman becoming the default primary care giver. Inequality in the length of parental leave further entrenches inequalities. On maternal health, I highlight that receiving only two weeks of paternity pay is extremely challenging if one's partner or birthing partner has experienced a traumatic birth, whether that is a C-section or otherwise. My wife went through a 40-hour labour and also a really difficult

pregnancy with hyperemesis, and that had impacts on both her physical and mental health. Many other women experienced the same, and the support of their partner is essential at that time. As so many people move around the country these days for work, many people live far away from their families, so having the father or the partner there is essential.

The evidence from other countries is clear: the longer the paternity pay, the better we are at closing gender pay gaps and the less the impact on the career prospects of the person giving birth. I end on a riposte to the previous Government for their shameful response to a petition in the last Parliament on this topic. Rather than extending paternity leave, the Government responded to it by simply exalting the benefits of being able to split the two weeks up and take them at different times. How generous that is! How useful that is cannot be underestimated—I am obviously being facetious. The Employment Rights Bill clearly does not go far enough, but I welcome this debate and the noises from those on the Government Benches that indicate they will consider this issue in the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Alistair Strathern, I have to impose a two-minute time limit because of the interest in this debate. It may be adjusted later.

4.42 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) for securing this important debate. For many, parenthood is one of the most exciting journeys of their lives, and one of the most rewarding, too, but speak to any parent and you will be under no illusions that it is also bloody hard work. For too many, it is also work that is split in an unequal and gendered way. We should not shy away from acknowledging the gendered way in which the cost of that imbalance is doled out across society. We should also acknowledge that every child, every parent, every family and every member of society loses out as a result.

In some cases, biological realities drive imbalances that are inevitable. As my partner Megan regularly points out to me, if we do ever have a child together, it will not be me that is likely doing the bulk of the having. But there are others that are entirely in our gift. This debate highlights a really important one: paternity pay.

I have spoken to far too many families, fathers and co-parents across my constituency who have had to make heartbreaking choices over the last few years as a result of the current inequity in parental pay and parental leave—fathers who have had to make the difficult choice about whether to squander their savings, which they could barely afford, to stick around for those crucial early months of their child's upbringing; or parents who have had to make the difficult choice of taking unpaid leave, which sometimes can be deeply contested with their employer, or depriving the mother of the support they need after a C-section while also going through all the burdens of early parenthood. These are not choices that anyone should have to make, and we must put that right.

[Alistair Strathern]

I welcome the action that the Government have taken already, particularly their introducing day one rights to paternity leave and pay, but it is clear we need to do more. I look forward to working with colleagues across this House and with the Minister to ensure that, over the course of this Government, we can deliver that change.

4.44 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I am the father of two young children, and I would not have missed their first months for anything in the whole world. I am proud to have been recently appointed chair of the all-party parliamentary group for childcare and early education, so I have a big interest in this issue and am keen to work with all parties on it.

I thank the hon. Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) for bringing forward this important issue. I hope the lack of turnout of Opposition Members is not a reflection of their lack of interest in this very interesting subject.

When I speak to other parents at the school gates and elsewhere, I am often told of their difficulties accessing paternity leave and therefore sharing parenting equally. With nursery costs spiralling and the wider cost of living crisis, it is time for better paternity pay, and it should be increased to 90% of a father's salary as soon as possible, so fathers and parents have options.

Development in early years is irreplaceable for children. They say it takes a village to raise a child, but in this country, we do not even seem to support two people raising one. Let us increase paternity pay, introduce a dad's month and widen eligibility for paternity pay. I hope the Government will work on a cross-party basis—I think they have already outlined that they will—to take action.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that the omission of the self-employed from eligibility for paternity pay, which rules out a large number of our constituents, is a major issue that needs to be addressed? Hopefully, we can encourage the Government to come forward with schemes to fill that gap.

James MacCleary: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that critical point for the self-employed, who often find themselves excluded. A lot of parents, including very good friends of mine, run their own businesses and have found it very hard to access paternity pay.

This is a critical equality and fairness issue, and I am really pleased that we are talking about it because it is very important to me. I am happy to work collaboratively with Members from across the House to improve paternity pay.

4.47 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I have spent the last 13 years advising women, in particular, in employment tribunals, and I have advised a lot of women who have suffered maternity discrimination. That was an absolute mainstay of my practice. My comments will be completely heteronormative; that is not to disparage any other family structures.

During the pandemic, for the first time large numbers of women and men were able to work from home. I say that because prior to the pandemic I spent a lot of time advising women on flexible working requests. If they asked to work from home for one or perhaps two days a week, that was habitually turned down. They were told that it was completely impossible; employers would not hear of it. Once men did it, it became absolutely acceptable, and it is now absolutely fine in most organisations for parents of either gender to work from home for one or two days a week.

If women continue to take the overwhelming majority of parental leave, they will continue to take the entire career burden and will be systematically discriminated against for it. This is a widespread issue: 54,000 women a year lose their jobs when they are pregnant or on maternity leave.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): We also have to think about all the women who do not have children but are discriminated against anyway because employers expect them to. Does my hon. Friend agree that to get paternity leave right, we have to ensure that everyone in their 30s and 40s is equally discriminated against because they might go off and have children?

Mrs Russell: I completely recognise what my hon. Friend says. The risk zone for women's careers starts when they are approximately 25 and carries on until they are at least 45. I have been advised not to wear my wedding ring to interviews because I was likely to be viewed as a pregnancy risk. Until we deal with that—until men take significant amounts of leave and are paid properly to do it—we will continue to face this issue, and women will be systematically discriminated against, as she says, whether they have children or not.

Approximately 12% of employers disclosed in a YouGov poll that they were reluctant to hire a woman simply because she might become pregnant. This is a widespread issue, whether women have children or not. We need non-transferable, “use it or lose it” parental leave for the second parent and we must ensure that that is paid at a rate such that people are actually able to take the leave. Once we have that and it becomes the default minimum—some fathers will choose to take significantly longer—everyone will be a risk, and everyone will be able to have career development. That will change the entire attitude towards maternity leave in our society. As I said, 54,000 women a year lose their jobs when pregnant or on maternity leave. All the women I advised thought they were just individually unlucky but given the volume of them I can say that they were not unlucky—it was systematic.

4.50 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) on securing this important debate.

It was a pleasure to welcome to Parliament parents, children and teachers from Europa school in my constituency last week. They were all campaigning with the Dad Shift, which the hon. Member has already mentioned, for paternity leave reform. The Dad Shift is calling for dads to be given substantial time that

is affordable, so that everyone can afford to take it, enabling both parents to have equality of access to such leave.

The moral and economic case for equal parental leave is clear. In countries that offer at least six weeks of paternity leave, the gender pay gap is 4% smaller and the workforce participation gap is reduced by 3.7%. That shows that supporting parental leave not only strengthens British families, but helps to grow the economy. We Liberal Democrats believe that parents should have greater flexibility and choice over how to manage work with parenting in the first months of their child's life. Greater equality in parenting will also lead to greater equality in the workplace, as the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) said.

With the forthcoming Budget, I very much hope that the Minister has sought opportunities to influence proceedings and to look for opportunities to improve parental leave. In the longer term, when the public finances allow, our ambition in the Liberal Democrats is to give all families six weeks of "use it or lose it" leave for each parent, paid at 90% of earnings, and 46 weeks of parental leave to share between them as they choose, paid at double the existing statutory rate. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments.

4.52 pm

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Pritchard, for calling me to speak in this debate.

I want to talk about the vision for the role of fathers in society, which other hon. Members have spoken about, and about how achieving that takes not only personal choice by fathers, but cultural and economic change. I feel that point about personal choice very acutely: at a very young age, my father chose not to be part of my life, and I am determined that that should not be repeated in my own family's upbringing. I am not unusual: for example, nine out of 10 dads will now go to antenatal scans and the birth. Fathers want to be part of their children's life and they want to be better fathers, but the culture and the economics make that difficult.

On the cultural point, when I was established in my own business, I made the choice to be a stay-at-home father for a period. However, such fathers are excluded from the coffee with the mothers after nursery pick-up and are not part of the "mum bus" WhatsApp chat. That culture continues, however, because of the economics behind it.

The gap between average pay and statutory paternity leave is about £1,000, which is something that parents cannot afford. There is a class element as well, with nine out of 10 households earning more than £60,000 a year able to take their paternity leave, while only two thirds of those earning under £25,000 a year can do so. If we want the cultural change, and that personal choice, to be taken advantage of, we need to deal with the economics and create more generous arrangements for paternity pay.

In particular, I agree with the suggestion of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) that, as well as looking at paternity leave, we also have to give people the ability to take crisis leave. This does not end with those first couple of weeks of changing nappies and going to the pharmacy; we need to have that ability as fathers throughout childhood.

4.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) for setting the scene so well. He is already making a reputation for himself in this House—well done—and I look forward to more debates in Westminster Hall.

Paternity leave in Northern Ireland allows for one to two weeks of leave to be taken. Statutory paternity pay can be paid if someone's average weekly earnings are £123. People can also get a wee bit more in relation to that, but it is an expensive time for a family and not much support is available. If we were living in Japan, we would not have to worry about it because there they have a year's paternity leave, but we are not. We are in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so it is very different.

Two weeks' semi-paid leave is very little when we look at what a woman goes through in the delivery process. Now that we have an increased pension age and more parents are working into their 60s, gone are the days of grandmothers coming to help with the housework and other jobs in the first month of a child's life. That simply is not a choice available to working grandparents and the pressure on mum is massive.

Another two weeks of paternity leave can make all the difference, especially when we consider that ladies who have had a difficult birth, an infection post-birth or a c-section, as my wife did, are unable to do any heavy lifting and need their husband more than ever. It is all about looking out for the family as a whole. I do not think we have it right when a dad has to go on the sick to ensure that his wife, who is two weeks out from major surgery, is not left alone and almost helpless with their new and totally dependent baby. When my youngest son and his wife had their last son, she ended up with a bad back afterwards, as a result of the pregnancy. That happens, and paternity care would have been great for her.

We need to offer a lot more support at what can be a vulnerable time in the life of the family. I look to the Minister to recognise the lessening wider family support and the need for the little family to navigate the period together, without taking sick leave or feeling guilty for not being in work. It is the most precious time in a family's life and we in this House have it in our power to do more to take away stress and give little ones the best possible start in life. I know that is what everyone in this House is committed to.

4.56 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) on securing this long-overdue debate. Previous debates have had a minimal turnout, so it is fantastic to see so many people here. I also pay tribute to the Dad Shift and the original campaigners Pregnant Then Screwed and Joeli Brearley.

Joeli Brearley came up with the pancake test: if we consistently put mums and dads in two different boxes, with mums looking after babies and dads having to go back to work after those first two weeks, when you have just realised that the meconium will eventually stop, it is mums who learn how to feed the child pancakes and dads who do not. It is mums who will get why some days the child wants pancakes rolled up, some days they

[Ms Stella Creasy]

want them flat and some days they want them with cream. That everyday caring for children is at the heart of being able to look after them, and slowly but surely it ends up being easier for the mum to take the child and to deal with the toddler, and dads get further and further away.

That is why, in the minute I have left, I want to argue in front of the Minister for PaPa—protected and paid leave—which we need for mums and dads in every single relationship. There is a risk that the Employment Rights Bill and the brilliant changes it introduces could entrench the challenges we are discussing, rather than helping us to resolve them. What do I mean by that? I mean that, if we entrench the idea that shared parental leave is the answer to the challenge, we are entrenching one of the biggest crimes against relationships. As the data shows us time and again, it is mums who end up having to look after children and mums who end up having to take that link. That is why in this country there is a motherhood penalty, which means that mums are seen as less committed, less capable, less competent and less worthy of promotion.

Mrs Russell: Does my hon. Friend agree that the idea that “part-timer” is a term of abuse is a shocking concept, and that what we are discussing today could help with that?

Ms Creasy: I completely agree. I was also shocked to hear Conservative Members, who obviously are not in this Chamber today, talking about flexible working as somehow lesser working. When people work flexibly, they do not work less—that is why they end up sending emails in the evening, because they are prioritising their time to do bedtime. They make it work for their family.

This debate is about making things work for families and tackling the inequalities in the workplace. Those inequalities are why we have a gender pay gap in this country—though in fact it is not a gender pay gap, but a motherhood pay gap. There is also a fatherhood premium, but we are showing in this debate that it is not a premium at all, because asking dads to work harder and longer and to be away from their children is not what modern dads want. That is why so many fathers look at flexibility in the workplace when they take on jobs, and that is why this debate matters.

If we want to support every family, it cannot just be the wealthiest who can set the terms on when they get to see their kids and make those pancakes. I therefore urge the Minister to consider an amendment that many of us will be tabling relating to PaPa for dads in their own right, because that will help every member of the family. I said it in the main Chamber, and I will say it again here: having PaPa is good for us, because our economic competitors are doing it, and we have some of the worst rates of paternity leave. It is also good because we can prevent another generation of dads reaching the stage of having teenagers who they have no relationship with, because they have not been there—not just to make pancakes, but to be the best dad they want to be.

4.59 pm

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and to speak as a father of two small boys. In fact, I was lucky

enough with both my children to receive paid paternity leave, but frankly that was because I was in a white-collar job that allowed it. With my second child, I would not have qualified for the paid paternity policy, but the good will of my employer allowed me to have that time with my family, which is so important. However, it should not be about the good will of employers.

In this country, we have only 52 weeks of maternity leave and two paid weeks of paternity leave. Ours is the most gendered leave system in the whole world, and the country's statutory pay offer is the least generous in Europe. Eligible UK fathers can take a maximum of two weeks' paid paternity leave at a rate of £184 a week. That is simply not enough for families to live on. Fathers are often not even eligible for that, for reasons of not being deemed employees, being self-employed, or not having worked long enough for their current employer. Shared parental leave is a welcome innovation, but too few families feel that they can take it—1% of mothers and 5% of fathers. There are huge barriers of eligibility and affordability, as well as the need for mothers to surrender their time at home so that fathers can take it.

A 2023 TUC study that looked into shared parental leave found that 35% of fathers in a household with an income of under £25,000 did not take it. That shows the huge class element: fathers on lower salaries are not able to take that time. Some 53% of families that do take up the leave struggle financially. We see that self-employed fathers cannot take the time, with about 70% not doing so.

I am pleased that the Employment Rights Bill will give day one rights at work to fathers so that we can give stronger support to our working families in my Livingston constituency and right across the whole country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that I will have to restrict speeches to one minute because we have a lot of speakers and are running out of time. I remind colleagues that if they intervene on someone, that person gets an extra minute, which eats into the time available. If Members need or want to intervene, and the intervention is accepted, so be it, but just be aware of that.

5.2 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) for bringing forward the debate.

Very quickly, I will speak from a personal perspective. Eleven years ago, our twins were born nine weeks early, when I had been with my then employer for five months. In the six weeks they were in hospital, I was given three and a half days of leave. One of those was on the day after my wife had a seizure and I had spent the whole night with her in the hospital. In fact, when my wife was told, when our children were 12 days old, that one of them had cerebral palsy, I was at work because the doctors had to tell her during working hours. That shows the complexity of the issue. When my children came home at six weeks, my two weeks' paternity leave was actually my holiday, because I was not entitled to a penny. I welcome what the Government are bringing forward for leave, but we have to look at the pay aspect and try to get it right, because we cannot repeat some of the mistakes that too many fathers like myself have experienced in the past.

5.3 pm

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) on bringing forward the debate. I similarly have an appalling personal experience. My employer was down-sizing, so I was forced to change jobs during my wife's pregnancy and, despite being open with my employer about the situation, I was completely ineligible for any statutory leave. They were a good employer—they actually happen to campaign on this specific issue—but the reality is that the overwhelming majority of people do not have that opportunity. Most people in this day and age do not stay with employers for an indefinite period of time, either through their choice or that of the employer. They cannot be cut out of the system, particularly when 92% of the cost of paternity pay is being paid out of their taxes by central Government in the first place. No father will be operating at peak levels of efficiency under those circumstances. Frankly, we have an appalling birth rate in this country that is dropping, and this is one of the reasons why that is happening.

5.4 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) on securing the debate. I will try to explain my experience in one minute.

A year ago this week, I had my two weeks of paternity leave. Quite frankly, there is an awful lot more that we need to do. I welcome the changes in the Employment Rights Bill, but it cannot be right that a father goes back to work two weeks after a birth if, for example, a mother who has had a caesarean section is still in recovery from that medical procedure and needs support at home. It is not a case of them being able to get up and do whatever they like at that point, so we should change that as quickly as we can.

On shared parental leave, my wife lost a month of her maternity leave so that I could have a month with my baby boy, and that stops parents wanting to take it. It made me think twice about taking it, rather than thinking, "What an amazing privilege it is to spend a month with my baby boy." Finally, we must ensure that all fathers can afford to take paternity leave. It is a financial penalty to many, and we really need to encourage all parents to be able to take time with their children.

5.5 pm

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) for bringing forward the debate. I have a declaration of interest: next Tuesday, I will become a father for the third time. Will I take two weeks of paternity leave? No, I will take three, and I still do not think that that is enough. My wife will have a caesarean, as has been mentioned, and the advice to her is clear that she should not drive for six weeks. We live in a rural village where if we do not drive, we do not take the other children to school. It is vital that families have the ability to take a longer time when the health of the woman and the wellbeing of the children is at stake.

5.6 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): The introduction of paternity leave by the last Labour Government in 2003 was one of those bold, progressive

changes that was opposed by some at the time, like the minimum wage that, years down the line, has become a much-valued right. The policy's opponents said that it would harm business, but actually it supports new dads to manage change and support their child, which means that employers benefit from staff who are ultimately more engaged with their jobs and able to do their work. Although we must not be complacent—I note that one of the Tory leadership contenders commented that maternity pay has gone too far—I hope that paternity leave remains a right that is never taken away. That is why I am pleased that the Government's Employment Rights Bill ensures that all new fathers can take paternity leave. An extra 30,000 fathers or partners across the country will benefit from that, with rights from day one. It is not just good for new mums and dads, and the children who they support, but essential in helping those children to have the best start in life.

Becoming a parent, especially for the first time, is a daunting prospect, with many new parents reporting poor mental health or even post-natal depression in the period shortly after. Not only is that bad for the adults concerned, but it has an impact on their children. Depression or anxiety is often exacerbated by the fact—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order.

5.7 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): This new Government's Employment Rights Bill will help to overhaul workers' rights, including by helping 30,000 new fathers to qualify for paternity leave. This will be much welcomed by many families as the statistics show that as many as two thirds of new fathers and partners who qualified for statutory paternity leave did not take it last year. The issue impacts particularly on lower income families or households where the father is the primary earner. Statutory paternity leave in the UK currently allows for only two weeks off, often at low pay that is significantly less than the national minimum wage, which is why the Employment Rights Bill is so vital. It offers greater flexibility for fathers in how and when they will take their leave, which reflects a broader societal shift, and we must support that.

5.8 pm

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): Time and again, my constituents in Makerfield have told me that having a child in this country is too expensive and exhausting. Mums have said that they have been forced out of their job through long maternity leave, and dads have told me that employers have made it impossible for them to spend time with their kids and support their partners. As other Members have said, only when dads take parental leave will we make maternity discrimination a thing of the past, but we also need a deeper cultural shift. As ever, the Tory party is lagging behind our society, as we have seen this week, because thankfully we no longer live in a world where women make the home and men make the money. Men want to be parents. They want to be dads, and to cook and do the washing. They want to hug their kids when they have had a tough day at school, to tear up when they watch a Disney movie, or to laugh with their kids at my best-known constituent, Hacker the dog. In an age when so many young men suffer from mental health problems and feel

[Josh Simons]

that they lack purpose in our society, we must talk about what it means to be a man in a way that is in step with the age.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is about not just all the things he mentions, but the impact on the mental health of the mother?

Josh Simons: I absolutely agree. The support that men can give to their partners is an absolutely vital part of the argument for paternity leave, which is why we need to talk about what it means to be a man in the society that we live in that is in step with the age that we live in. Strength and resilience are qualities that my wife has just as much as me. Care and love are qualities that I have just as much as her. Being a dad is about care, protection and love as well as strength and courage. As men, we must take pride in both.

I very much hope that the Government's review of parental leave will include paternity as well as maternity leave, and that it will cover pay and duration of leave for employees of firms of all sizes. Every week working parents I represent open the door exhausted and broke, despite loving their kids with all their heart. Better paternity leave is vital to show that we value parenting, kids and family in this country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but there are two or three speakers whom I cannot get in because of the time. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for five minutes, followed by the shadow Minister for five minutes, and then the Minister for eight or nine minutes.

5.10 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) on securing this incredibly important debate. It is important to parents, children, our whole society and our economy. May I just say that it is wonderful to see so many men here, particularly fathers who have shared their experiences so personally and passionately? It is important that men are at the forefront of this debate, alongside women, to achieve the cultural change that needs to take place.

Parental leave, and paternity leave in particular, is a subject that rarely receives the attention it deserves. As the parent of two primary-aged children in a family where my husband has been the primary carer ever since I returned to work full time following maternity leave, I am passionate about ensuring that every family can have genuine choice in their caring arrangements in the early months and years. When we talk about the early years, the debate often focuses on childcare, because of how difficult it is for families to access affordable and flexible childcare, but that is only part of the picture. The Liberal Democrats believe that parents should have greater flexibility and choice over how to juggle work with parenting in those early few months.

It is important to be clear that, as the hon. Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) said, mothers unarguably have a unique and vital role, and that must never be undervalued. No matter what certain right hon. and hon. Members may think—not those present today, I am sure—maternity pay is far from excessive. It is too low and needs to be increased, but that is a debate for another day, because we are talking about paid paternity leave. As we have heard, paternity leave gives dads a bit more time to form the crucial bond with their children. We know that it is beneficial for boys and girls when they have strong bonds with their dad.

Greater equality in parenting will lead to greater equality in the workplace. At the moment, the imbalance in parenting is a major driver of the gender pay gap. On average, a woman's earnings take roughly a 40% hit when she has her first child and they do not recover. A man's earnings, by contrast, barely take a hit. That was why I was proud that it was the Liberal Democrats in government who introduced shared parental leave in 2015. That major step forward gave parents choice over how to share up to 50 weeks of leave and 37 weeks of pay between them, but it was just a first step. As we have heard, there is much more to do.

Take-up of shared parental leave and paternity leave remains far too low, and we know that affordability is a key reason why. A poll last year found that 62% of fathers would take more leave if statutory paternity pay were increased. We need a major overhaul to give parents a genuine choice. First, the rates need to rise. At less than half of full-time pay at minimum wage, today's statutory rates simply are not enough to give parents a real choice. The Liberal Democrats proposed in our recent manifesto that paternity pay be boosted to 90% of pay, with a cap for high earnings. We also called for statutory parental pay to be doubled.

The second issue is eligibility. Unlike maternity leave, paternity leave is not a day one right. I am glad that the Employment Rights Bill will address that but, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor), that is not the only barrier. We need to extend rights to self-employed parents, too.

Thirdly, two weeks is simply not enough, as many Members have set out so eloquently. It is well below the average of 12 weeks that we see across advanced economies, and evidence from places such as Quebec shows the importance of a longer period of leave reserved for fathers in boosting the take-up of parental leave by men. That is why the Liberal Democrats have also proposed that one month of paid parental leave should be a "use it or lose it" month for fathers and partners.

The previous Conservative Government made grand promises on this issue. In their 2019 manifesto, they pledged to make it easier for fathers to take paternity leave. In the end, all that amounted to, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) said, was allowing fathers to take their two weeks in two separate one-week blocks instead of having to take it all at once. That was a welcome change, I am sure, but it is hardly the overhaul that our system needs. I hope that the new Government will be much bolder and take up the plans that we Liberal Democrats set out in our manifesto to create a system that gives all families a real choice over how they want to care for their children in those precious months.

5.15 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) on securing the debate. I also thank the numerous Members who contributed to the debate. I would run through them all—I have written them down—but there are 17 and I am conscious of time, so I will move forward.

I welcome the fact that so many Members have come here to talk about this important subject. Opposition Members want to ensure that employees do not have to choose between a rewarding career and a fulfilling life. Due to reforms that were introduced by the previous Government, Britain now has a vastly improved paternity leave package.

In July 2019, the previous Government consulted on whether the existing arrangements for parental leave and pay were adequate, and whether more could be done to better balance the gender division of parental leave and pay between parents. The consultation sought views on the costs and benefits of reforming parental entitlements and any trade-offs that might need to accompany such reform. The Government response, published in June 2023, set out detailed reforms to paternity leave and pay, fulfilling a previous manifesto commitment to make it easier for fathers and partners to take paternity leave. The reforms included: giving employed fathers and partners more choice and flexibility around how and when they take their paternity leave, as we have just heard, allowing them to take two separate blocks of one week of leave; giving employed fathers and partners the ability to take their leave at any time in the first year after the child's due date or birth, rather than just in the first eight weeks after birth or placement for adoption; and changing the requirements for paternity leave to make them more proportionate to the amount of time the father or parent plans to take off work, cutting the amount of notice of dates from 15 weeks before the expected week of childbirth to 28 days before the leave will be taken.

Moreover, the previous Government supported the passage of what was then called the Shared Parental Leave and Pay (Bereavement) Bill—a private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Chris Elmore), who was at that time the hon. Member for Ogmores—to remove the qualifying employment condition for shared parental leave when the birth mother or adopting parent had died. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bridgend for steering the Bill through Parliament. It provided an important extension of support and protection for parents facing one of the most challenging situations in their lives.

I am conscious of time, so I shall wind up. His Majesty's Opposition have taken note of the measures proposed in the Employment Rights Bill concerning paternity leave and pay. The Conservative party has always been the party of business, but we have also been pro-worker; getting the balance right is vital. We will therefore closely review the Bill's provisions as it progresses through the House and will assess them on their individual merits.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate

my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Shaun Davies) on securing today's debate, which has been very well attended. I did not think that we would see such unanimity, but there is clearly a fresh view in the House. We would not have had this sort of turnout or this kind of debate in previous Parliaments, but there is clearly a mood among newly elected Members—and of course among older, more experienced Members—for change.

I would reference all the contributions, but we will not have time for that. As always, I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), for Livingston (Gregor Poynton), for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis), for Crawley (Peter Lamb), for Makerfield (Josh Simons), for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall), for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), for Congleton (Mrs Russell), for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge), for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre), for Mid Derbyshire (Jonathan Davies), for High Peak (Jon Pearce), and the hon. Members for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) and for Lewes (James MacCleary) for their contributions. I think that shows that across the nation there is great interest and appetite for reform. Apologies if I did not catch everyone's contribution.

I will make a couple of points. The hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo), and I think a couple of other Members, talked about the fact that those working in the gig economy and those who are self-employed do not qualify for any paternity leave. Clearly, we have set out in our "Next Steps" document on employment law reform a review of the worker status and self-employed issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton raised, as I would expect her to, the very important points about maternity discrimination. She will know that there are measures in the Employment Rights Bill to strengthen protections against dismissal for those on maternity leave. I cannot continue without mentioning and congratulating in advance my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak on his impending fatherhood for the third time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Telford was absolutely right that this issue is about not just the father's role, but the wider role in society and the bond between father and child. He talked about his research into how Government Departments had handled the matter. It is fair to say that, as a newly elected Government, we want to see Government being an exemplar of best practice as an employer. He expanded our often-used phrase of being "pro-worker, pro-business" to add "pro-family". I have no difficulty with that in this context.

The Government are committed to ensuring that employed parents receive the best possible support for their work and home lives. Our plan to make work pay will ensure that there is more flexibility and security for working families. Workers must be supported to work, while balancing the essential ingredients of their wider family life, whether that is raising children, improving their own wellbeing or looking after a loved one with a long-term health condition.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Justin Madders: I am sorry but I do not have time to take interventions.

[Justin Madders]

We recognise that parental leave and pay entitlement, such as paternity leave and pay, play a key role in that balance. It is an important part of the lives of parents and children for the parent to be able to take time away from work when their child is born—or first placed, as we recognise this debate covers other arrangements—so that partners can provide support and families can be together for the first time. We know the parental system needs improvement. Hon. Members can look back on previous debates, where it is clearly on the record that Labour in opposition felt that the parental system was in need of reform. I will set out some of the changes we plan to make in relation to the Employment Rights Bill.

As has been said, there have been some modest improvements in arrangements in the last 12 months. On 6 April, changes were introduced that allow parents to take leave and pay in two non-consecutive weeks, at any point in the first year after the birth or adoption of their child, and to give shorter notice for leave periods. That was a move forward but we want to go further. The Employment Rights Bill will make paternity leave a day one right. Currently, parents are eligible for leave only if they have been employed in their job for 26 weeks, by 15 weeks before the baby is due.

We will remove the requirement for a continuity of service condition for paternity leave. That will allow eligible employees to give notice of their intention to take that entitlement, from day one in the job. It will make paternity leave accessible to all employees, including those who may have low job security and low continuity of service, not only those who are able to reach the current set qualifying periods. We believe this measure will bring tens of thousands more parents into scope for the entitlement, meaning that many more families will benefit from protected time off.

We will make other changes to paternity leave to make it more flexible for parents. We will remove the restriction requiring paternity leave and pay to be taken before shared parental leave and pay. Currently, when shared parental leave and pay is taken, fathers lose their right to take any paternity leave and pay that they have not already taken. We think that is creating unintended consequences, and we will remove that restriction in order to provide the flexibility for employees to take advantage of the different types of leave available to them at the moment to care for their child in whatever order works for them and their family. That will also remove the risk that parents will lose their entitlement to take paternity leave and pay by misunderstanding the restrictions. As several hon. Members said, it is a complicated process; I had not realised that there was a cottage industry in completing forms for shared parental leave. That is clearly something we need to consider in due course.

We are making other commitments to improve parental leave. We are going to make unpaid parental leave a day one right. The provision gives an employed parent the right to take up to four weeks of leave per year for their child, unless the employer agrees to more. The maximum leave per child is 18 weeks in total. Currently, an employee must have worked in their job for a year to qualify for that entitlement. The Employment Rights Bill will remove that continuity of service requirement, and regulations will then enable parents to give notice of their intention

to take that leave on the first day in a new job. We are very keen on having day one rights for employees in a whole range of areas. That, alongside the changes to paternity leave and pay, will increase flexibility and solidify and enhance economic activity for employed parents. Evidence shows that people who move jobs get wage increases. The current system of employees waiting up to a year for parental leave entitlements when they change employer means that parents are put off seeking new jobs that could have boosted their family income at a time when they need it more than ever.

We also know that the whole parental leave system does not support working families. As Members have said, we have committed to a review of the parental leave system. Inevitably, we will not be able to do that without looking at the questions raised today about how paternity leave and pay work. It is clearly part of a larger interconnected web. The review will be undertaken separately to the Employment Rights Bill, but work on planning for its delivery is already under way.

I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Telford an opportunity to respond, so I will bring my speech to a close. We are listening carefully to the many representations we have heard. Our plan to make work pay is a core part of our Government's mission to grow the economy, raise living standards across the country and create opportunities for all. It will help more people stay in work, improve job security and boost living standards. The whole approach we are taking will benefit families across the board. It will benefit workers and businesses beyond the important specific interventions we have talked about today. We have a very important package of measures that I am proud to be a part of delivering in this new Government.

5.26 pm

Shaun Davies: It has been a fascinating debate, as the Minister says. Most parts of the United Kingdom were covered, and I could say that there is cross-party progressive alliance on the issue. I hope that the Minister has noted that there is a significant amount of support for paternity leave and pay. There is an appetite from people like myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons) to use the Employment Rights Bill as the vehicle for this progressive change, but if that does not happen, engaging with the review of the parental leave system would be most helpful. The statutory minimum is the statutory minimum, and the Government and the public sector should see it as an opportunity lead the country in what fathers should expect in a workplace. I hope that colleagues from the Cabinet Office will take note.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I will be very brief. I am a former small business owner—does my hon. Friend agree that as part of that review, we should also be looking at and promoting to small businesses the benefits of adequate family leave and flexible working at the same time to help grow the economy?

Shaun Davies: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend's point on small businesses. It is interesting that since this debate was secured, a number of employers have come forward to talk about the steps they are taking and their appetite for taking further steps—they see it as an opportunity to address recruitment and retention issues, too.

I look forward to working with the Minister and thank him for his contribution. I know that there will be further such conversations over the course of this Parliament.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for being very helpful. It was very difficult for you to speak for just one minute, and pretty much everybody did. I congratulate you, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie), who I sadly was not able to call, but who seized his opportunity to speak by intervening

on the mover of the motion in the last minute. I also congratulate my friend and neighbour, the hon. Member for Telford (Shaun Davies), on his first Westminster Hall debate, which I am sure will be the first of many over the coming years.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered paternity leave and pay.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 23 October 2024

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Regulatory Partnership for Growth Fund

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): Today I am announcing a new £2.3 million regulatory partnership for growth fund (RPGF), which will help to unlock export opportunities worth nearly £5 billion for UK companies over five years.

The RPGF will help UK regulators work with international partners to remove trade barriers and shape markets in various growing sectors. The Department for Business and Trade will offer grant funding agreements to UK regulators and standard setting bodies in order to undertake targeted, specific interventions to unlock regulatory market access barriers.

The fund builds on the Prime Minister's call at the international investment summit last week for UK regulators to support the Government's growth mission, keep pace with emerging industries and upgrade the regulatory regime to make it fit for the modern age.

This will see UK businesses, including in growth-driving sectors, benefit from almost £5 billion of new export opportunities over five years, with trade barriers worth £300 million being targeted within the first 12 months—equivalent to an average of £135 in exports per £1 invested.

For example, the fund will generate new opportunities for the UK offshore wind supply chain to export their products and services globally; enable the UK's pharmaceutical industry to more easily sell medicines in markets around the world; and improve the process for accreditation of UK education providers to sell their services abroad.

List of organisations to receive funding

Architects Registration Board (ARB)
Operators of UK National Information Centre for global qualifications and skills (Ecctis)
The Food Standards Agency (FSA)
The Law Society of England and Wales
The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE)
Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult (OREC)
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

[HCWS157]

TREASURY

UK and Ecuador: Double Taxation Convention

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): A double taxation convention with Ecuador was signed in Quito on 6 August 2024. The text of the convention is available on the HM Revenue and Customs pages of the gov.uk website and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. The text of the convention will be scheduled to a draft Order in Council and laid before the House of Commons in due course.

[HCWS160]

DEFENCE

UK-Germany Defence Co-operation Agreement

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): Earlier today, together with my German counterpart Boris Pistorius, I signed an agreement on defence co-operation between the United Kingdom and Germany. The agreement will strengthen bilateral defence co-operation and will enhance our mutual security. It represents a significant milestone in the defence relationship between our two countries and underscores our shared commitment to maintaining peace and stability in Europe.

This defence agreement builds on the strong foundation of co-operation between the UK and Germany and reflects our shared values and strategic interests. It is a testament to the enduring partnership between our two nations and our commitment to working together to address common security challenges. The agreement will contribute to the security of the Euro-Atlantic region and will help to support the defence industries of both countries by enhancing co-operation in research and technology, and developing co-operative equipment programs. The agreement will also enhance bilateral interoperability between our armed forces, across all domains, and will support us in working together to strengthen standardisation in NATO.

The agreement will provide a comprehensive structure to ensure bilateral co-operation is managed in a holistic and systemic way; a new defence ministerial council will oversee co-operation across the whole of defence, providing greater strategic co-ordination across the breadth and depth of the relationship.

The defence agreement will see the UK and Germany work together systemically for years to come on a range of ground-breaking defence projects. We will jointly develop and procure extended deep precision strike capabilities to provide a conventional deterrent in Europe; focusing on developing new capabilities which far exceed the ranges of our current systems.

In the air domain, we will work jointly to develop and employ uncrewed aerial and offboard air systems, and enhance connectivity, to ensure interoperability between our respective future combat air systems. To enhance our co-operation on land, we will foster a deep industrial partnership between our defence industries and work to strengthen NATO by developing doctrine, uncrewed systems, and enabling capabilities, to transform our land forces.

We will enhance undersea co-operation between the UK and Germany in the north Atlantic and North sea, significantly contributing to the protection of critical undersea infrastructure and sea lines of communications. We will facilitate episodic deployments of German P-8A Poseidon Maritime Patrol Aircraft in the UK, and co-ordinate combined and joint anti-submarine warfare operations with ships, submarines, and aircraft.

The UK Government remain steadfast in their commitment to the defence of the United Kingdom and our allies; we are confident that this agreement will contribute to the security and prosperity of both our nations and the wider European region. We look forward to working closely with Germany to ensure its successful implementation.

This defence agreement will serve as the first pillar of a new comprehensive bilateral treaty, which is currently being negotiated with Germany by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and is due to be signed by early 2025.

A copy of the joint communiqué can be found on gov.uk here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-germany-trinity-house-agreement-on-defence>.

[HCWS159]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Tackling Child Poverty

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): Today, the Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) and I are pleased to announce that we are publishing, “Tackling Child Poverty: Developing Our Strategy”.

Since 2010, child poverty has increased by 700,000, with over 4 million children living in poverty in the UK, and 800,000 children using food banks to eat. This is a scar on our society, which holds back children’s life chances and damages our country’s prospects. Breaking the link between background and success in life is at the heart of our opportunity and growth missions.

The Prime Minister has tasked us to develop an ambitious child poverty strategy which will be published in spring 2025. This is a shared endeavour across all parts of the UK, and we can learn from action being taken in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our Government will tackle overall child poverty, assessed by the leading and internationally recognised measure of poverty, but also go beyond that to focus on children in deepest poverty lacking essentials, and what is needed to give every child the best start in life.

Today, our publication sets out how we will develop the strategy which will harness all available levers to deliver a reduction in child poverty this Parliament as part of an ambitious 10-year strategy which addresses root causes including:

Supporting households to increase their income, including considering social security reforms that support people into work and alleviate poverty.

Helping to bring down essential household costs.

Increasing financial resilience by tackling problem debt and helping families manage financial shocks through savings and affordable credit.

Alleviating the negative experience of living in poverty, including through supporting families and the role of public services.

Over the coming months, the child poverty taskforce will hear directly from experts on each of the strategy’s themes including children and families living in poverty and work with leading organisations, charities, and campaigners.

In October, we have invited partners in industry, regulation and the charity sector to share evidence and ideas on options to reduce essential costs for low-income families.

In November, employers, trade unions and think tanks will be invited to discuss options to increase incomes and financial resilience in low-income households.

In December, experts on children’s health, early years and education and representatives from civil society will be invited to share experience and expertise on ensuring low-income families are able to access quality services to tackle the impacts of poverty.

Ministers will take part in engagement events across the nations and regions of the UK, bringing together a diverse range of voices. A new forum of parents and carers living across the UK will be set up to ensure the experiences of children in poverty, including disabled children and those with special educational needs, are included. They will feed directly into the strategy.

Living in poverty not only harms children’s lives now, it damages their future prospects and holds back our country. Children living in poverty are denied the opportunities that should enable them to achieve and thrive. And Britain cannot see maximum economic growth when the talents of so many children are being lost. Our ambitious child poverty strategy will reduce child poverty, tackle the root causes, and give every child the best start in life.

[HCWS158]

Petition

Wednesday 23 October 2024

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Closure of High Lane Post Office

The petition of residents of the Hazel Grove constituency,

Declares that High Lane Post Office should not close on 19 September; and further declares that the post office service is vital for the local community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to remain open the Post Office in its current location and not to close.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Lisa Smart, *Official Report*, 3 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 278.]

[P003007]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):

Thank you to the petitioners for raising the closure of High Lane post office. I fully appreciate the impact a

post office branch closure can have on a community. I know it can be disruptive, particularly for communities who do not have nearby alternatives.

The Government set geographical access criteria to ensure that 99% of the UK population lives within three miles of a post office. The Government's access criteria ensure that however the network changes, services remain within local reach of citizens. The post office network meets Government-set access criteria at a national level.

Post Office has the freedom to make commercial decisions regarding the composition of its network, provided that it fulfils the Government-set access criteria. Decisions around individual branches are operational decisions for the Post Office.

I understand that the High Lane post office closed following the resignation of the postmaster and withdrawal of premises for Post Office use. While the Post Office network can fluctuate between areas and regions, I understand the priority of the Post Office is to work with communities to ensure that services are maintained. The time this can take will vary depending on the individual local circumstances in each case.

My officials inform me that the Post Office is currently advertising the opportunity to run a branch at High Lane post office. Post Office is speaking to interested parties and will provide an update as soon as more details are available.

Written Correction

Wednesday 23 October 2024

Ministerial Correction

WORK AND PENSIONS

Carer's Allowance

The following extract is from the Opposition day debate on Carer's Allowance on 16 October 2024.

Andrew Western: On the wider points, I will begin with the question of the adequacy of carer's allowance, set as it is at £151 per week. Carer's allowance will be increased in April 2025 by the consumer prices index to

help ensure that it maintains its value. As well as carer's allowance, carers in low-income households can claim income-related benefits such as universal credit and pension credit.

[*Official Report*, 16 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 883.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western):

Andrew Western: On the wider points, I will begin with the question of the adequacy of carer's allowance, set as it is at **£81.90** per week. Carer's allowance will be increased in April 2025 by the consumer prices index to help ensure that it maintains its value. As well as carer's allowance, carers in low-income households can claim income-related benefits such as universal credit and pension credit.

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