

**Monday**  
**11 November 2024**

**Volume 756**  
**No. 42**



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

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**  
**(HANSARD)**

**Monday 11 November 2024**

---



# House of Commons

*Monday 11 November 2024*

*The House met at half-past Two o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### WORK AND PENSIONS

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Child Poverty

1. **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): What recent estimate she has made of the level of child poverty in Rugby constituency. [901102]

6. **Tracy Gilbert** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): What recent estimate she has made of the level of child poverty in Edinburgh North and Leith constituency. [901108]

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall):** This morning the nation fell silent to pay tribute to all those who have served and continue to serve in our armed forces, and those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. Today we honour and remember them. I quote the words inscribed on Lutyens' beautiful Arch of Remembrance in Leicester from the hymn "O Valiant Hearts":

"All they hoped for, all they had, they gave to save mankind—themselves they scorned to save".

Some 4.3 million children are growing up in poverty—700,000 more than in 2010. That is why the work of our cross-Government child poverty taskforce is so urgent, and why we will use all levers available to increase family incomes, reduce family costs and give every child the best start in life.

**John Slinger:** I have had the privilege of assisting the brilliant volunteers at the Make Lunch organisation in Rugby, which provides holiday lunch clubs with play activities for entire families, including those with complex needs. Last summer it fed 25 families, last Christmas it bought slow cookers for families and this Christmas it is offering hampers. They treat families with dignity. As with food banks, is it not an indictment of the record of the last Government that such charitable support is needed in the first place?

**Liz Kendall:** Make Lunch sounds like an absolutely brilliant charity, and I ask my hon. Friend to pass on our great thanks for its fantastic work. That work is urgent, because the Child Poverty Action Group estimates that a quarter of children in my hon. Friend's constituency are growing up poor. Our child poverty strategy will be published in the spring, but we will not wait to act. That is why the Budget announced a new fair repayment rate to slash universal credit deductions and give 1.2 million of the poorest households £420 on average a year, lifting thousands of children out of poverty.

**Tracy Gilbert:** Previous Labour Governments have tackled not only poverty but its root causes. Can my right hon. Friend outline how the child poverty taskforce will identify and tackle the root causes of poverty in my constituency and across the UK, to ensure a permanent end to child poverty?

**Liz Kendall:** I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend thinks that it is unacceptable that an estimated one in six children in her constituency is growing up poor. We have taken immediate action to help the poorest families in Scotland through our fair repayment rate, which will benefit 110,000 households in Scotland. We are tackling the root causes of poverty with our reforms to make work pay, tackle exploitative zero-hours contracts and create more good-quality jobs in every part of the country.

**Patrick Spencer** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Child poverty is a scourge in British society, and I am grateful that the Secretary of State is bringing forward a child poverty strategy. Has she decided how to measure child poverty? May I warn her against using the much discredited relative measure, which, as we know, shows poverty decreasing during times of economic decline and increasing during times of economic growth? I implore her to use an absolute measure, which has a much better record of showing deprivation and long-term increases and improvements in living standards.

**Liz Kendall:** I am afraid I will disappoint the hon. Gentleman: we will look at relative poverty after housing costs, but we will go further and look to alleviate the very deepest poverty. It is appalling that hundreds of thousands of families are forced to rely on food banks—something that I know only too well from my time chairing Feeding Leicester. We will look at relative poverty, deep poverty and what it will take to give every child the very best start in life, by bringing together support from public services, charities and other groups. That is the way to bring down poverty and make the changes sustainable.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Northern Ireland has some of the highest child poverty figures in the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Secretary of State wants to help. We have had a 70% increase in food bank usage in my constituency in the past 12 months, which is an incredible indication. Will she kindly tell me what discussions she has had with her counterpart in the Northern Ireland Assembly on what more can be done to help?

**Liz Kendall:** The Minister from Northern Ireland is a member of our child poverty taskforce. I hope to visit soon and the co-chair of the taskforce, the Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), also plans to visit. We have introduced the new fair repayment rate to slash the level of universal credit deductions because, as food banks in my constituency have told me, that really pushes people into poverty. That is not what the Government should be doing, and that is why we have taken action. I look forward to coming to Northern Ireland to talk to the hon. Gentleman, his constituents and the organisations fighting poverty to see what more we can do.

### PIP Application Process

2. **Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the personal independence payment application process. [901103]

**The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms)**: The application process for personal independence payment is being kept under review. An online process is being trialled and we are looking at further potential improvements.

**Ian Roome**: One of my constituents in receipt of PIP is sight-impaired, deaf-blind registered and cannot use a phone or fill out forms. Can the Minister tell me why PIP reassessments are being scheduled for people with incurable disabilities and terminal illnesses?

**Sir Stephen Timms**: The hon. Gentleman raises a very fair point. It is, of course, important that we keep the awards under review, because sometimes they go up as well as down and we want to ensure that the support being provided is appropriate for the claimant. We also need to ensure that the process is accessible—I agree with him about that. Help can be provided to manage the assessment process. If he would like to send me more details about his constituent, I would be glad to see what we can do to help.

**Mr Speaker**: I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Yesterday, it was reported in the Sunday papers that a blind woman with additional complex needs had her PIP assessment over the phone, which was approved, but was then sent a letter to confirm that. The charity Sense says that over half the people it surveyed feel humiliated by the process. I know my right hon. Friend is very keen to get this right, so will he expand a little more on the type of things the Department is changing?

**Mr Speaker**: Before the Minister replies, may I ask Members to look at the Chair, as third party, when they are asking or answering questions? I am being cut out. Those are not my rules but those of the House on how we should address each other, so if anybody has a problem, please have a word with the Clerks.

**Sir Stephen Timms**: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. Indeed, she and I worked on an excellent Select Committee report on health assessments for benefits, which provides some very important and valuable recommendations to the Department. We will continue to look at this issue. I am not familiar with the case that she refers to, but I will dig out the details. Clearly, it is vital that the process should be accessible to people with sight impairments or any other impairments. I completely agree with her.

### Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training

3. **Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab): What assessment she has made of trends in the number of young people out of work, education and training. [901105]

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall)**: The legacy we inherited is almost 1 million young people not in education, employment or training—nearly one in eight—with all the long-term consequences we know that can bring for their future earnings, job prospects and health. That is why our new youth guarantee will ensure that every young person is earning or learning, which is better for them, better for the economy and better for our country as a whole.

**Andrew Pakes**: The DWP has described Peterborough as a national youth unemployment hotspot. In September, the youth claimant count was running at nearly double the national average. Places like Peterborough college, through its Jobsmart provision, are already pulling together a coalition to respond to that challenge. I welcome the Government's youth guarantee and "Get Britain Working" plans to ensure that young people in places like Peterborough are given the opportunity to earn or learn. Will the Secretary of State please confirm a timetable for the publication of the White Paper?

**Liz Kendall**: The "Get Britain Working" White Paper will be published imminently, backed by £240 million of investment announced by the Chancellor in the Budget. I look forward very much to talking to my hon. Friend and the organisations that are working so hard locally, because I believe that the man, or even woman, in Whitehall can never know what is best in Peterborough, Leicester or Leeds.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): A small business in my constituency to which I have spoken over the last few weeks has raised concerns about the impact of the national insurance rises in the Budget on, in particular, those in lower-paid work, who in many cases are young people starting their jobs. What impact do the Government think that those rises will have on young people and youth unemployment?

**Liz Kendall**: Just last week I visited a very large employer in my constituency, Tesco, and saw the fantastic work that it is doing with the King's Trust to ensure that more people get into work and stay in work. It is determined to work with us and our local schools, and employment and other providers, because they know that rather than writing off nearly a million young people, which led to the situation that we inherited, this new Government have a plan to get people into work, enable them to get on in work, and ensure that every young person has the chance in life that he or she deserves.

**Mr Speaker**: I call the new shadow Secretary of State, and welcome her to her post.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): May I say how nice it is to be sitting opposite the right hon. Lady again, albeit, regrettably, having swapped places with her? I enjoyed our exchanges on social care during the last Parliament, and appreciated our constructive conversations during the pandemic, although, given how well she knows the care brief, I suspect that she was gutted, as I was, to see the incoming Government abandon the care cap and scrap more than £50 million of funding for social care training. The consistent feedback from jobcentres was that the biggest barrier to young

people taking up job opportunities in social care was lack of career progression, hence our reforms to create a career path for care workers and investment in training. Has the right hon. Lady spoken to her counterpart in the Department of Health and Social Care about the impact of those social care cuts on her ambitions to get more young people working or learning?

**Liz Kendall:** I, too, welcome the hon. Lady to her post. As she has said, while we will always have our political differences we have also worked closely and constructively on issues that matter across the House, such as the terrible problems facing social care during the pandemic. I will continue that work, and I hope that the hon. Lady will as well, in her new role.

The hon. Lady asked about the impact of what is happening in social care on people's opportunities and chances to learn. I have already had many discussions with, among others, members of integrated care boards, and they are passionate about the opportunities that exist to get more people into work and enable them to get on in their work, including jobs in social care. Joined-up working between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions will be at the heart of our plans to get Britain working, because, unlike some Opposition Members, we do not find it acceptable for 2.8 million people to be locked out of the workforce owing to long-term sickness. We have a proper plan to get Britain working and growing again.

**Helen Whately:** The right hon. Lady will know that under the Conservative Government youth unemployment fell by 380,000, and that we were tackling inactivity with our WorkWell programme, helping people to stay in work or return to work, which I am delighted to see the right hon. Lady continuing. Unfortunately, however, as a result of her Government's Budget and Employment Rights Bill, businesses will slash the number of their employees. Moreover, the Government have just broken another promise and hiked up university fees. What advice would the right hon. Lady give a young person who is currently out of work and education, and must choose between worse job prospects and more expensive university degrees thanks to her Government's choices?

**Liz Kendall:** The hon. Lady's party left nearly a million young people not in education, employment or training, and almost a record number of people—2.8 million—out of work owing to long-term sickness. They failed to introduce reforms to join up work, health and skills properly, and they have not learnt from those mistakes. I am proud that this Government are investing an extra £240 million to get Britain working again, giving people the opportunities that they need to work and build a better life.

### Pension Credit: Uptake

4. **Lewis Atkinson** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase uptake of pension credit in winter 2024-25. [901106]

10. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to help increase uptake of pension credit. [901112]

20. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase uptake of pension credit in winter 2024-25. [901124]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, His Majesty's Treasury (Emma Reynolds):** We have launched the next phase of our pension credit campaign on radio, TV and print media, and the Government have written to 120,000 pensioners on housing benefit who may be eligible but are not currently claiming pension credit. After less than five months in government, we are bringing forward the merger of housing benefit and pension credit, which the Conservatives announced 13 years ago but failed to deliver.

**Lewis Atkinson:** Under the previous Conservative Government, many eligible pensioners in Sunderland Central did not receive the pension credit that they were due. When I speak to organisations such as Age UK Sunderland, they tell me that that was often because people did not know how and whether to claim. How many pensioners are now taking up pension credit thanks to the actions taken by this Government?

**Emma Reynolds:** We have seen a 152% increase in pension credit claims since late July, with over 74,000 pension credit claims up to mid-September. We know that many local authorities and, indeed, Members of this House—including me last Thursday—are helping pensioners on low incomes to ascertain whether they are due pension credit.

**Jamie Stone:** There will be people who are eligible for pension credit living in very remote areas, where connectivity is less than great. It is an appalling thought that they might miss out on what they are due. May I suggest to the Department that the way to reach out to those people might be through a database, followed by a mailshot?

**Emma Reynolds:** In addition to merging housing benefit and pension credit, which will help some of the people whom the hon. Gentleman has in mind, the Secretary of State and I have asked the Department to look at what can be done to make the application form simpler. The Department will report back to us by the end of the month, and we will update the House in due course.

**Tonia Antoniazzi:** I welcome the Government's campaign to get people to sign up for pension credit, and I urge every pensioner in Gower to sign up and attend my pension credit event on 22 November. Does the Minister agree that we should highlight the fact that pensioners who go over the threshold could still be eligible because they receive another benefit, such as attendance allowance, or because higher housing costs are taken into account when applying?

**Emma Reynolds:** Yes, indeed. Assessing somebody for pension credit is a complex procedure, so we urge all those on low incomes to check whether they are eligible. We have seen an increase in the number of people applying online with the help of local authorities, Members of Parliament and charities, and we urge everybody who thinks that they might have an eligible family member to encourage their loved ones to apply.



**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Temperatures are set to drop to zero across Scotland by next weekend. Many pensioners are scared to put on their heating, with the *Big Issue* reporting a three-month delay in claims for pension credit. Can the Minister let us know what she is doing to ensure that those claims are processed as quickly as possible so that people can get the money into their pockets?

**Emma Reynolds:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We want people who are eligible to get support, and we have redeployed 500 staff to process those claims. I can assure her that that is something that we are focused on.

**Mr Speaker:** We come to the shadow Minister.

**Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Con): The withdrawal of the winter fuel payment from 10 million households, including 70% of disabled pensioners, is a huge change, as is using pension credit to distribute the benefit to the minority of people who will still get it, yet the Government have rushed this change through without giving their own statutory advisory committee the chance to properly scrutinise it. Ministers have not even responded to the chair of the committee, who wrote to them several weeks ago with suggestions on how to mitigate the effect of the policy. On top of that, they have failed to provide a full impact assessment to show what the effect on poverty would be. Will they finally produce a full impact assessment of this policy, and when will the Minister respond to the chair of the advisory committee?

**Emma Reynolds:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. In answer to his questions, we have published an equality analysis, which he can find on the Government's website. Owing to the legislation, we do not have to produce an impact assessment, but there is an equality analysis. I urge him to have a look at that. All I would say to him is that the new Leader of the Opposition argued in 2022 that winter fuel payments should be means-tested. I wonder how the hon. Gentleman might means-test the winter fuel payment, if he had the chance.

**Danny Kruger:** The Minister mentions the equality assessment. That was a high-level equality assessment that was only dragged out of the Government in response to a freedom of information request. The fact is that they are avoiding accountability for this policy and avoiding scrutiny by the House. The Government are saying that the impact of the cut on the poorest pensioners will be mitigated by pension credit, and we have heard from the Minister about the very small numbers who are taking up pension credit in response to this announcement. Their own figures predict that fully a third of eligible pensioners—that is 750,000 of the poorest people in the country—will not get pension credit and will not get the winter fuel payment.

That is what the Government are banking on. That is how they are making the savings that they predict from this policy: by cutting benefits to some of the poorest people in our country—[*Interruption.*] The Minister shakes her head, so she might want to put me right. Does she want all eligible pensioners to claim pension credit? [*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State says yes. If she does want that, does she then accept that the Government's savings from this policy will be completely wiped out?

**Emma Reynolds:** Yes, and no.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, Steve Darling.

**Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): On Armistice Day, it is important that we as a Chamber reflect on the Royal British Legion and its "Credit their Service" campaign. This is a campaign to ensure that when benefits are calculated, military compensation is disregarded. In the light of this, will the Secretary of State give serious consideration to disregarding military compensation when calculating pension credit?

**Emma Reynolds:** I associate myself with the hon. Gentleman's comments and those of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I will look carefully at what the hon. Gentleman has suggested and get back to him.

### Poverty

5. **Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help reduce levels of poverty. [901107]

**The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern):** After 14 years of Conservative Government, 8 million adults and 4.3 million children were left in poverty. Among other things, £240 million was recently announced in the Budget to support better work so that people can get the dignity of a good job and the security of a proper wage. Details will soon be available, as the Secretary of State mentioned, in our "Get Britain Working" White Paper.

**Torcuil Crichton:** I thank the Minister for that answer and the assurance from the Dispatch Box that the maximum level of debt repayment from a household's universal credit is to be reduced from 25% to 15% each month. That is great news for Scottish families, who could benefit by an average of £420 a year. Much of that debt management is carried out at the DWP centre in Stornoway in my constituency, and some 65 of the 80 staff there are involved in responding to calls nationally. That is a good example of job dispersal, and their service is high quality and is now involved in reducing poverty. I encourage the Minister to come and meet the staff there, to meet clients and to see the operation for herself.

**Alison McGovern:** My hon. Friend mentions the new fair repayment rate, which is another crucial part of the Budget and a downpayment on the action that we will take on poverty. I am fond of an invitation to Scotland, and I will happily accept that one.

### Universal Credit: Assessment

7. **Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the universal credit assessment system. [901109]

**The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms):** The Department has adopted an iterative approach, updating the universal credit system to reflect user needs as they develop. The new Government are committed to reviewing universal credit to make sure that it is doing the job we need it to.

**Mike Martin:** One of my constituents spent six hours fully awake during an operation that went wrong, as doctors battled to save her life. Obviously, this affected her mental health, and she was deemed unfit for work by her GP and by a clinical psychologist. She then went through a half-hour telephone assessment for her universal credit health check, which deemed her fit to work, so she does not get universal credit and it was not backdated to the operation. Does the Minister think that that sounds right? If not, will he review the case?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for drawing my attention to that. What he has described sounds very odd indeed, and I will be happy to look at the details if he will let me see them. We are absolutely committed to making sure that universal credit does the job that we need it to, including for people in the situation that his constituent has found herself in.

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Last week, I was made aware of a constituent who is a carer for his wife, who experienced a stroke in 2016. The constituent is a veteran who lives with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and was awarded carer's allowance in 2017. Late last year, the DWP began demanding the return of more than £51,000 in alleged universal credit overpayments, and this April, under the previous Government, the DWP began taking it from his state pension without warning. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this case in more detail so that I can help my constituent?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** As my hon. Friend will know, there have been some very troubling cases of carer's allowance overpayment. I am not sure whether carer's allowance is part of the overpayment he describes, but I will be very happy to meet him to discuss what has gone wrong in this case.

#### Jobcentres: Broxbourne

8. **Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase the support available in jobcentres in Broxbourne constituency. [901110]

**The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern):** Jobcentres serving the Broxbourne constituency and elsewhere will change following the "Get Britain Working" White Paper, which has already been mentioned. This fundamental reform will have three parts: a new public employment service to get more people into work and to help them get on in work; a joined-up work, health and skills plan; and a guarantee for young people aged 18 to 21.

**Lewis Cocking:** The Budget has made it even harder for small businesses in my Broxbourne constituency to create jobs. What can the Minister do to make sure that jobcentres connect with local businesses to help those who are looking for work to find sustainable employment?

**Alison McGovern:** I thank the Minister for his question—[*Interruption.*] Honestly, I am still getting used to being on this side of the House.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that jobcentres everywhere need to be locally responsive to employers, and that we need to provide an excellent service to local

employers. If he has further thoughts on how we can make that work in his constituency, I would be very happy to discuss it with him.

#### Universal Credit: Two-child Limit

9. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What assessment her Department has made of the potential merits of removing the two-child limit for universal credit. [901111]

**The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms):** The last Labour Government dramatically reduced child poverty, and we want to repeat their success. The child poverty taskforce is exploring how to harness all available levers, including social security reform, and it will publish its strategy next spring.

**Munira Wilson:** The Prime Minister has said that he wants to break down the barriers to opportunity and tackle child poverty. He has also said that "insecurity is the enemy of opportunity."

Given that by the time the child poverty taskforce reports next spring, a further 16,000 children will have been dragged into poverty, and given the devastating impact that poverty can have on a child's education, their health and their vulnerability to the criminal justice system, why will the Minister not do the right thing and scrap the two-child benefit cap to lift 300,000 children out of poverty immediately?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** The strategy will be very clear about how we will tackle the scourge of child poverty, and the hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the importance of doing that. Labour voted against the two-child limit, but we will not promise change until we know how we are going to pay for it. That will be addressed in the work of the taskforce, with the results published in the spring.

#### Household Support Fund: Extension

11. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the extension of the household support fund in 2025-26 on low-income households. [901113]

15. **Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the extension of the household support fund in 2025-26 on low-income households. [901118]

19. **Damien Egan** (Bristol North East) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the extension of the household support fund in 2025-26 on low-income households. [901123]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western):** No specific assessment has been made of the impact of the household support fund on low-income households in 2025-26, although we hear routinely from local authorities across the country about the impact of the fund in supporting those who are struggling. An evaluation of the fourth iteration of the scheme, running from April 2023 to

March 2024, will be published shortly, exploring the benefits of the more than 19 million awards made during this period.

**Warinder Juss:** I agree that the payment of winter fuel allowance should be means-tested, because many pensioners who receive the winter fuel allowance simply do not need it. However, there are pensioners who are not entitled to pension credit who will struggle to heat their homes. Can the Minister please confirm the extent to which the household support fund will assist those pensioners in my Wolverhampton West constituency?

**Andrew Western:** The household support fund is intended to support a wide range of households in need, including pensioner households. There has been no ringfencing of funding for specific groups since October 2022, meaning that local authorities have the flexibility to support pensioners who are just above the pension credit threshold. In the 2023-24 financial year, 26% of household support funding went towards meeting energy costs.

**Alistair Strathern:** I welcome the Government's decision to provide more than £1 billion in new funding for the household support fund, extending it all the way through next year, and to give much more notice to the local authorities that deliver it. The funding is so important not just to countless vulnerable residents, but to great local organisations, such as the Need Project food banks in my constituency. How will the Department work with local authorities to make the most of the notice and to ensure the funding goes as far as possible?

**Andrew Western:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As a former local authority leader, I know that above all else, certainty will allow councils to design and deliver sustainable plans for local welfare assistance. The Government's commitment to funding the HSF until March 2026 offers that certainty and time to plan with greater confidence. To that end, we will confirm individual allocations for the forthcoming one-year extension to the HSF as soon as possible, and ahead of the scheme beginning on 1 April.

**Damien Egan:** Because the household support fund is devolved to local councils, there are lots of different examples of how the funding is spent, so how will the Minister ensure that the money from councils goes to the people who really need it?

**Andrew Western:** Like me, my hon. Friend is a former local authority leader—albeit a directly elected mayor, and with a far greater mandate, therefore, than I ever enjoyed. Like me, he will appreciate the importance of empowering local areas to respond to local need. That said, all councils must develop delivery plans to show how they are targeting the funds to support the most vulnerable, to ensure that the spirit of the HSF is upheld in helping low-income households with the cost of essentials.

### Pensioner Poverty

12. **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce levels of pensioner poverty. [901114]

**The Parliamentary Secretary, His Majesty's Treasury (Emma Reynolds):** The last Labour Government lifted more than 1 million pensioners out of poverty, and this Government remain absolutely committed to supporting pensioners. We know that there are low-income pensioners who are not claiming pension credit, and we urge them to apply. This will passport them to receive other benefits too.

**Brendan O'Hara:** These are extremely worrying times for millions of pensioners who simply cannot fathom why one of the first acts of this new Labour Government was to remove their winter fuel payments. The Minister will be aware that last month the SNP Scottish Government opened applications for the pension age disability payment, which could be worth up to £434 a month for pensioners with disabilities or long-term health conditions. It will be piloted in Scotland next year. Will the Minister join me in welcoming this initiative and encouraging those who are eligible to apply for it?

**Emma Reynolds:** It is good to see that the SNP Government are focusing on that issue now, because during their 17 years in government, we have seen increases in pensioner poverty across Scotland.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Pensioners in poverty now have just 40 days to apply for the winter fuel payment via the pension credit system. Will the Minister look at extending the deadline so that more people can claim pension credit and get the winter fuel payment?

**Emma Reynolds:** I reassure my hon. Friend that we have redeployed 500 additional staff to process the claims. We are working at pace to process them, but 21 December remains the deadline.

### Carers: Support

13. **Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve support for carers. [901115]

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall):** As a lifelong champion of unpaid family carers, I am proud that the first Labour Government in 14 years have given unpaid carers the biggest ever cash boost to the amount they can earn while still receiving carer's allowance. That means family carers can earn an extra £2,000 a year and still keep their allowance. That is the difference this Labour Government are making: supporting families who do the most important thing, which is caring for the people that they love.

**Samantha Niblett:** I have spoken to many people in my constituency of South Derbyshire who are taking on caring responsibilities for loved ones. I know how hard that is and I am so grateful for the job they do, but it is often a thankless task. I am glad that the Government have taken action to support people in our communities who take on caring responsibilities, but it is disproportionately women who do so. Will the Secretary of State outline how the increase in the threshold will benefit women and allow them greater freedom to work?

**Liz Kendall:** My hon. Friend is right: 60% of unpaid carers are women, but women spend more hours caring, so they are disproportionately represented when it comes



to receiving carer's allowance. This is a small, but significant and important, step forward. It is a signal that the new Government understand that as people live for longer and care for longer, we will have to do more to help families balance work and caring responsibilities. That is the truth of family now: it is as much about caring for our elderly and disabled loved ones as it is about caring for our own wonderful children.

### Pension Credit: Uptake

14. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What estimate her Department has made of the number of pensioners eligible for Pension Credit but not claiming it. [901117]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Emma Reynolds):** Estimates for pensioners who are eligible for but not receiving pension credit were published in early October. The estimates show that more than 800,000 pensioners—individual pensioners, not households—are entitled to pension credit but are not claiming it.

**Clive Jones:** As the Minister will know, the Chancellor's cruel decision to tie winter fuel allowance to pension credit, despite knowing that the uptake of pension credit is very low, will force thousands of vulnerable pensioners to choose heating or eating this winter. With 16,577 pensioners in Wokingham expected to be affected by the cuts, will she extend the deadline to apply for pension credit and consider pledging further support to increase take-up?

**Emma Reynolds:** I refer the hon. Gentleman to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell): the deadline remains 21 December. Thanks to the Government's steadfast commitment to the triple lock, more than 12 million pensioners will see their pension increase by more than 4% in April next year, up to £470. Over this Parliament, they will be better off by around £1,900, thanks to the triple lock. Low-income pensioners can also apply for the warm home discount scheme and, thanks to the extension of the household support fund, local authorities can target that support on low-income pensioners. In the longer term, the warm homes plan will transform homes across the country by making them cleaner and cheaper to run.

### Child Poverty

16. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to reduce levels of child poverty. [901119]

**The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern):** As well as putting in place breakfast clubs that mean children are ready to learn, and as well as the fair payment rate—we have discussed that—which will stop families being tipped into destitution by debt, the ministerial taskforce, chaired by the Work and Pensions and Education Secretaries, will publish the child poverty strategy in spring 2025, using all available levers across government to bring about an enduring reduction in child poverty in this Parliament, as part of a 10-year strategy for lasting change.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** We know that the previous Government presided over shameful levels of child poverty, including nearly 500,000 children who are eligible for free school meals but who are missing out. Will my hon. Friend, alongside the Education Secretary, urgently look at the proposal by Feeding Britain for auto-enrolment to free school meals as part of the single application process for families claiming UC?

**Alison McGovern:** One person who has never looked the other way when people were facing poverty in this country is my hon. Friend. Through her innovation, she has ensured that household food insecurity is measured properly, and I pay tribute to her efforts. I have listened to what she said about Feeding Britain, and I will take that as an input into the child poverty taskforce. I hope that she and Feeding Britain will meet me to discuss how we can take that forward.

### Parents Looking for Work

17. **Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help support parents who are looking for work. [901120]

**The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern):** Helping parents to have fulfilling and sustainable work helps our economy and prevents child poverty. As we have mentioned several times, the "Get Britain Working" White Paper will rewrite employment policy and set our ambition for an 80% employment rate, but we will not get there without parents.

**Tom Hayes:** In recent weeks, I have met the DWP in Bournemouth and advice agencies including the citizens advice bureau for Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole. Advice agencies welcome the record increase in carers allowance that was announced in the Budget. They and in-work parents with disabled children have also asked about the transition from child tax credit to universal credit. That may be a matter for the "Get Britain Working" White Paper, but can the Minister say how the Government will further support such parents to work and earn, and flexibly meet their families' needs?

**Alison McGovern:** I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this matter to the House, and I pay tribute to all those he has worked with to understand the challenge that we face. He is right that we will take this forward through the "Get Britain Working" White Paper. Citizens Advice is playing an important role in supporting that work, and the work of the child poverty taskforce.

### Pensions Review

18. **Alan Gemmell** (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): What progress her Department has made on the pensions review. [901122]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Emma Reynolds):** I am leading the Government's landmark pensions investment review, which aims to increase pensions investment in the UK economy and improve retirement outcomes for future pensioners. An interim report will be published soon. Phase 2 of the review, which will focus on pension adequacy, will be launched later this year.

**Alan Gemmell:** David Carson and Patricia Kennedy, constituents of mine in Central Ayrshire, face massively reduced pensions payments from their pre-1997 contributions to their Hewlett Packard pension, because current legislation index-links contributions from 1997 only. What assessment has the pensions review made so far of the challenges facing pension schemes, and will the Minister meet me to discuss David and Patricia's case? The issue affects some hundreds of thousands of people.

**Emma Reynolds:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that case. I would be very happy to meet him, or any other hon. Member who has such cases in their constituency; however, the pensions review will look more at how current pension schemes can improve outcomes for future pensioners. We are looking at driving scale in consolidation of defined contribution pension schemes and local government pension schemes, and at a shift away from cost to value. I know that there is interest in that from across the House, and I hope that we can work on it across the parties.

### Winter Fuel Payment Eligibility: Impact

21. **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of changes to the eligibility criteria for the winter fuel payment on trends in the level of pensioner poverty. [901125]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Emma Reynolds):** The Government remain absolutely committed to supporting pensioners. We are urging pensioners to check their eligibility for pension credit to ensure that as many people as possible have access to the support to which they are entitled.

**Rebecca Smith:** Ninety-seven-year-old Joyce from my constituency was worried about losing her winter fuel payment, so she contacted my office. It sounds like the Minister has had a similar experience. Fortunately, my team was able to assist Joyce. We ran a full benefits check, and helped her to secure pension credit, and therefore her winter fuel payment entitlement. However, does the Minister think that it is right that the oldest and most vulnerable should have to resort to getting their MP to help them claim pension credit?

**Emma Reynolds:** I am glad to hear that the hon. Lady was able to help her constituent. We are looking at the form, as I mentioned in a previous answer, and we will update the House soon on those developments.

### Pension Credit: Uptake

22. **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): What progress her Department has made on meeting pension credit application targets. [901126]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Emma Reynolds):** The Department does not have a pension credit application target. Published application numbers show that we received around 74,400 pension credit claims in the eight weeks from the end of July to mid-September.

**Sarah Olney:** In the weeks following the Chancellor's announcements on the winter fuel allowance, the number of pension credit applications doubled, then nearly tripled. Now the DWP is delaying releasing any more data on this subject. I am concerned that the Government know that they will not be able to process the applications on time, and that the information is not being put into the public domain. Will the Minister tell me exactly how many pension credit applications have been submitted since 16 September, and whether the backlog will be cleared before older people start having to make a choice between heating and eating?

**Emma Reynolds:** I gently say to the hon. Lady that we are not delaying the publication of statistics. A new set of statistics will be published soon. As I said in previous answers, we have redeployed 500 additional staff to helping to process pension credit applications. We urge all those who have loved ones who are pensioners, or who are pensioners themselves, to apply if they think that they are eligible.

### Topical Questions

T1. [901127] **Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall):** The Budget took the first steps in this Government's plan to drive up opportunity and drive down poverty in every corner of the country: it included an additional £240 million for our plan to get Britain working, a new fair repayment rate in universal credit to help over 1 million of the poorest households, and the biggest ever package to reduce fraud and error in the system, ensuring that every pound of taxpayers' money is wisely spent. There is much, much more to do, but in the Department for Work and Pensions, change has begun.

**Calum Miller:** My constituent Kevin had to stop work in 2018 due to a medical condition. He is desperate to find a job, but has consistently found that he is not eligible for support from his local jobcentre. Kevin asked me, "How does someone who has fallen out of work get back into work?" Will the Secretary of State or a Minister meet me to discuss Kevin's case, and see if, together, we can answer his question?

**Liz Kendall:** The hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point. It is not right that his constituent, who wants to work, has suffered from a mental health problem but does not have the support that he needs. In parts of the country, steps have been taken to help provide the healthcare and other support that people need, but we need to go further, faster. My hon. Friend the Minister for Employment will indeed meet the hon. Gentleman. Let's get cracking on this and see what we can do.

T2. [901129] **Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): On my recent visit to Hertford and Ware food bank, hard-working volunteers raised with me the damaging impact of rules introduced under the previous Conservative Government, which prevent jobcentres from referring benefits claimants to food banks. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those changes prevent some of the

most vulnerable people in our communities from accessing support in an emergency, and will she set out the steps that the Department will take to reverse them?

**The Minister for Employment (Alison McGovern):** There have been changes to ensure that referrals are GDPR-compliant, but I will happily discuss this issue with my hon. Friend. The very best jobcentres are closely linked with local support organisations, and we must ensure that that is the case everywhere.

**Mr Speaker:** We come to the shadow Secretary of State.

**Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con):** The Conservatives are the party of work and aspiration, and once again, we left office with unemployment at a historic low. We all know that Labour always leaves unemployment higher than when it came into office, but rarely has it seemed in such a hurry to achieve that. Its first Budget will, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, cost the country 50,000 jobs in the next few years alone. What assessment has the right hon. Lady made of the cost to her Department of those job losses?

**Liz Kendall:** May I gently say this to the hon. Lady? She should be apologising, because we have record numbers of people out of work due to long-term sickness; one in eight young people is not in education, employment or training; and people are locked out of the world of work because the Conservatives failed to make proper plans to get people into work and on in their work. Until Conservative Members face up to their responsibilities, and to the cost to the taxpayer of their mistakes in not getting people with long-term sickness into work—£25 billion extra over the course of the forecast period—they will remain on the Opposition Benches.

**Helen Whately:** I wonder if the Secretary of State did not hear my earlier question; I said that I was grateful that she is continuing the work that we did in government, through the WorkWell programme, to help people in ill health into work by joining up healthcare and employment. However, the point I was just making, to which she did not respond, was that 50,000 jobs will be lost as a result of Labour's Budget. That is not the only thing frightening the life out of businesses at the moment—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The hon. Lady can keep pointing at me, but this is topical questions, and I have all these Back Benchers to get in, so questions really need to be shorter.

**Helen Whately:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Budget is not the only thing frightening the life out of businesses at the moment. Labour's Employment Rights Bill is a wrecking ball for the UK labour market. Labour's own impact assessment predicts that businesses could cut staff—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I did make the suggestion that you might come to the end of your question, but you decided to carry on reading, so I will have to stop you. I call the Secretary of State.

**Liz Kendall:** I am very proud of a Budget that invests in the long-term growth that this country needs, that gives a pay rise to the 3 million lowest-paid workers,

and that invests in the NHS so that people can get back to health and back to work. That is the change that this country desperately needs.

T3. [901130] **Ben Goldsbrough (South Norfolk) (Lab):** As a proud member of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, I want to raise with the Minister the amazing work that it has done to produce the estimate that around three quarters of workers in typically low-paid sectors are paid weekly, fortnightly or four-weekly, rather than monthly. That is not recognised by universal credit. Will the Minister promise to meet USDAW and other trade unions to make sure that this matter is investigated?

**The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms):** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If a person is paid four-weekly, they receive 13 payments a year, so in one of the 12 monthly assessment periods each year, they are paid twice. That means that they probably get no universal credit that month, which completely messes up budgeting. I would be delighted to meet USDAW, and perhaps my hon. Friend, to discuss what we can do through our review of universal credit.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD):** I am sure all Members in this Chamber are aware of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign and the parliamentary ombudsman's findings. Will the Secretary of State commit to making a statement in the House before Christmas on progress with her review of the ombudsman's report?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Emma Reynolds):** As the hon. Gentleman will know, the ombudsman took six years to consider a range of complex cases, and we are looking at their complexity. I was the first Minister in six years to meet representatives of the WASPI campaign. We hope to be able to update the House in the coming weeks.

T5. [901132] **Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab):** The work of unpaid carers is of huge value and is often heroic. A recent report by Carers UK revealed that 42% of those receiving carer's allowance are struggling financially. I was therefore really pleased by the significant increase in carer's allowance announced in the Budget. It is the largest increase in decades and will benefit many in my constituency. Does the Minister agree that this change will help mitigate the financial challenges that carers have faced for the past 14 years?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that research from Carers UK. The Budget increased the earnings threshold, so people will be able to earn £10,000 a year from work and still claim carer's allowance, and an extra 60,000 carers will become entitled to the allowance. It is a very big step forward.

T8. [901135] **Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD):** Research from the University of Bath shows that over half of working households receiving UC have incomes that fluctuate from payment period to payment period, sometimes by up to £400. This is to do with the way that assessment periods are calculated, and the income coming into people's accounts. In 2019, the High Court ruled



that the system should be smoothed, and that the DWP should look at different ways of doing that. Can the Secretary of State update the House on where we are with the implementation of that High Court judgment?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** As I mentioned earlier, we are committed to reviewing universal credit. The way it works means that in each assessment period—each month—there is a new calculation based on the income that the person has received, as reported by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. However, I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to talk about how the system needs to be improved further.

T6. [901133] **Torsten Bell** (Swansea West) (Lab): Carers matter, including the 3,400 carers in Swansea West, so I welcome the significant move in the Budget to increase the amount that carers can earn while retaining carer's allowance. History tells us that awareness of the rules is low, so what plans does the Department have to communicate this important, major policy change to carers?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The threshold will increase on 7 April next year, and all current claimants will receive an annual uprating letter in the spring that will set out the new limit. As I mentioned a moment ago, 60,000 new unpaid carers will also become eligible for the allowance at that point.

**Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): Given the new Government's collective condemnation of the two-child limit over the eight years since it was introduced, which includes condemnation from many Government Members on Select Committees, will they at the very least commit to scrapping its heinous, sexist and frankly disgusting rape clause element?

**Alison McGovern:** The hon. Lady raises some of the worst aspects of the consequences of 14 years of Conservative Government. We will consider all those issues through the child poverty taskforce.

T7. [901134] **Dan Aldridge** (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): Weston-super-Mare is a town of sanctuary for many people with care needs, and 1,319 people there will be better off because of the Government's increase to carer's allowance. Can the Minister share the timescales for the independent review of carer's allowance?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on being the Labour Member for Weston-super-Mare. I have met Liz Sayce, who will carry out the review, and she is raring to go. The terms of reference and timelines have not yet been set, but they will be in the next few weeks. As soon as they are, the details will be placed in the Library.

**Suella Braverman** (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): Kevin is a pensioner in Waterlooville who has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and struggles to breathe in the cold. His personal budget puts him, on average, about £55 above the poverty line, but he is one of many thousands of people who will be hit by the Government's cruel cut to the winter fuel allowance. Political point scoring aside, what practical advice does the Minister have for Kevin to get him through the harsh winter ahead?

**Emma Reynolds:** I would suggest a number of things: the warm home discount scheme is available for those on low incomes, including pensions; we have extended the household support fund that local authorities can and should use to help people on low incomes; and in the longer term, the warm homes plan will help to make homes across the country more energy efficient and cheaper to heat. I will also say that thanks to the Government's commitment to the triple lock, pensioners will be about £1,900 better off over this Parliament.

T9. [901136] **David Burton-Sampson** (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I agree with the Minister that it is vital for everyone who is eligible for support to claim for it, but what steps is she taking to ensure that claiming for pension credit is as simple as possible?

**Emma Reynolds:** As I said in answer to a previous question, we are looking at the form. Some 90% of applicants now apply online, but we note that the paper form is long and we are considering how we can simplify it.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): Eastbourne veteran Pauline was awarded military compensation for injuries that she sustained in the service of our country, but she said that that has caused her pension credit entitlement to plummet from £70 to just £10.42 a week. Will the Minister meet me to discuss her case and ensure that no veteran is penalised for their service to our country?

**Emma Reynolds:** The hon. Member is the second person to raise that issue and I happy to meet them both.

**Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): How many current Department employees cannot receive further sponsorship due to the previous Government's changes to the skilled worker visa salary threshold?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western):** My hon. Friend asks an important question and I will be delighted to follow up with him in writing.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): According to the census, 72% of Somalis here live in social housing, compared with 16% of the population overall. In answer to my written question, the Department says it is "exploring the feasibility" of publishing benefits claimed by nationality, which is important for a proper debate on benefits policy and immigration policy. Can the Minister confirm that that work is going ahead and tell us when the data will be published?

**Andrew Western:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that nationality and country of origin are not factors in assessing benefit eligibility. We may look at that in future, but I would be delighted to follow up with him in writing about how we will take it forward.

**Mr Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): When I speak to my constituents, from Lofthouse to Farnley, they are extremely concerned about the amount of money being lost to fraud and error in benefits. Can the Minister confirm a timeline and a plan to get back the £35 billion that has been lost since the pandemic?



**Andrew Western:** My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue. The spiralling nature of fraud in this country since the pandemic and on the last Government's watch is totally unacceptable. We will bring forward a fraud, error and debt Bill in the coming months, which is part of a much broader package—the largest-ever package brought forward by any Government—to take out more than £7.6 billion of fraud over the forecast period.

**Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): Citizens Advice tells me that the DWP continues to start action on alleged overpayments more than six years after the event.

That is longer than bank records are kept to prove otherwise. Does the Secretary of State think that that is fair and right?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is asking specifically about carer's allowance or about other benefits, but if benefits have been overpaid, the Department has an obligation to recover the money. What is important is that overpayments are identified sooner and that people are notified when there is a problem, so that we do not get the very large sums that have accrued in overpayments in the past.

## Defence: 2.5% GDP Spending Commitment

3.35 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his commitment to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence.

**The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):** I congratulate the shadow Defence Secretary on securing the first Defence urgent question of the new Parliament. Previous Defence Secretaries answered just two urgent questions in the whole of the last five years. Although I cannot promise to answer every future UQ, I wanted to answer the hon. Gentleman's first one today to underline just how seriously I take our Department's responsibility to report to this House.

The Government have a cast-iron commitment to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence. We promised it in our manifesto at the election, the Prime Minister promised it at NATO in Washington in July, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor promised it in the Budget two weeks ago, as well as announcing a £3 billion boost for defence spending next year to start to fix the foundations for our armed forces. That, of course, is on top of £3 billion each year for Ukraine. I remind the House that the last time this country spent 2.5% of GDP on defence was in 2010, with the last Labour Government—a level not matched in any of the 14 Tory years since.

Everyone agrees that defence spending must increase to match and deal with the threats we face. One of our very first acts as a Government was to launch the strategic defence review, which is working at pace to look at the threats we face, the capabilities we need and the resources we have available. It is not just about how much we spend, but about how we spend it. The Prime Minister said at NATO that our plan in the SDR will come first, and then we will set out the pathway to spending 2.5%; the Chief Secretary to the Treasury said yesterday that this will come in the spring.

Today is Armistice Day. At the eleventh hour, I had the honour of laying a wreath at the Cenotaph. Today is a reminder of what is at stake in this new era of insecurity; a reminder that our dedicated servicemen and women, around the clock, around the world, work to keep us safe; and a reminder of the ultimate sacrifice that so many have made in the past so that we may live in freedom today. We will remember them.

**James Cartlidge:** Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, especially on Armistice Day. I am grateful for the Secretary of State's response, but he keeps going back to 2010 when we spent 2.5%. That is true, but he says it without adding the fact that his Government had bankrupted the country. In fact, I asked the House of Commons Library about this. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has confirmed that if Labour had returned to government, it was planning cuts to the defence budget of 20% to 25%.

But this question is about today. The threat picture is far graver than it has been for many generations, as the Chief of the Defence Staff confirmed at the weekend. As the Secretary of State says, the Labour party committed in its general election manifesto to a

"path to spending 2.5 per cent of GDP on defence."

The Prime Minister said shortly after taking office that it was "cast iron", which the Secretary of State has repeated today.

With President Trump's election victory, there will inevitably be a greater focus on what more European NATO members can do to boost Europe's own defence, but yesterday the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and this morning the Secretary of State himself were unable to say whether the Government would deliver on 2.5% in the current Parliament. In addition, yesterday *The Sunday Times* reported that Defence Equipment and Support in Abbey Wood has effectively been instructed to avoid any new procurement at all for the rest of this financial year.

Spending 2.5% is not an end in itself. The key reason that in April we set out a fully funded multi-year pathway to 2.5% was to enable the Ministry of Defence to procure, at pace and at scale, the munitions that we need to urgently replenish our stocks to warfighting levels. With the whole world wanting to buy more munitions, we cannot afford to delay any further.

I have key questions for the Secretary of State, because at the same time we are having this debate, there are a whole load of new burdens coming for the MOD which it will have to cover. In which financial year does he expect the share of GDP spent on defence to start rising significantly, and will he guarantee to hit 2.5% in this Parliament—yes or no? Not including existing programmes, is it true that there is a freeze on new procurement of defence equipment and support for the rest of this financial year? Will the MOD be 100% compensated by the Treasury for higher employer national insurance contributions and for the cost of increasing continuity of education allowance, and will service families be 100% compensated for the extra VAT on school fees? Penultimately, on Armistice Day can the Secretary of State absolutely rule out surviving spouses of service personnel being taxed on death in service benefits? Finally, on the Chagos islands, in the Department's written answer to me it refused to say how much the MOD will contribute to renting back our own military base, so this is a very simple question: the Secretary of State will not tell us how much it is going to cost, but does he know how much it is going to cost?

**Mr Speaker:** Please remember that when I grant urgent questions, the time each person has is limited. It is two minutes for the main Opposition party and one minute for the other Opposition party.

**John Healey:** Fourteen years the Conservative Government had to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, and there was not a plan or a pathway from the last Government, as the shadow Defence Secretary tries to claim. It was a political ploy that was announced four weeks before they called the general election. It was unfunded, and it was a con on the armed forces and on the British people, who gave their answer emphatically by sweeping away Tory MPs in many of the proudest military communities and constituencies across the country.

On the shadow Defence Secretary's accusations about a total spending freeze, I am putting in place a grip on the out-of-control spending that the last Government left. We are securing value for money, we are cutting waste and we are getting a grip on defence spending in a way his Government did not.

We greatly value the continuity of education allowance and greatly recognise the role it plays in helping avoid disruption to the education of the children of serving personnel. In line with how the allowance operates, we will continue to pay up to 90% of private school fees following the VAT increase in January. By uprating the cap, we will take account of any increase in spending.

On the Chagos islands, of course I know the details because I was heavily involved in the negotiations. This secures Britain's military base, and it secures a military base for our US allies, which is why they welcomed it so strongly. I have said to the shadow Secretary of State and to the House that when it debates the treaty, this House will have the full information.

Nobody knows better the defence inheritance that 14 years of Conservative government have left us for the past four months than the shadow Defence Secretary: he was a Defence Minister at the heart of the problems, with billion-pound black holes, service morale at record lows, and a crisis in the recruitment and retention of personnel. Never again must a Government leave our armed forces in a worse state than they found them, and this new Government will make this country more secure at home and strong abroad.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): We live in an increasingly dangerous and volatile world, with hundreds of thousands of people dying or being injured on our own continent in Ukraine, and wars and conflicts raging in the middle east, Africa and beyond, not to mention the increased nefarious activity in the grey zone. Without a shadow of a doubt, we are dealing with exceptional circumstances and we need to grasp the gravity of the situation. I have a great deal of time and respect for the Secretary of State because I know that he gets it, but do others in government understand the gravity of the situation, because we need clarity? We need a timetable so that not only our allies, but those in our defence community, know where we are heading.

**John Healey:** Yes, they do. Everyone agrees that defence spending must increase, and it is increasing under this Government. It increased in the first Budget of this new Government by nearly £3 billion for next year. Alongside that is the cast-iron commitment that we are a Government who will set a path to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Lib Dem spokesperson.

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): We are deeply concerned about the impact of the US elections on Ukraine and Europe. President Trump is an unreliable partner and, within days of his election, US support to Ukraine is regrettably under question. Clearly the UK needs to urgently set out a path to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence. We need to lead in Europe. Does the Secretary of State agree that the previous Government's legacy on our Army, which is the smallest since the Napoleonic era, is deeply regrettable? Will he commit to securing a UK-EU defence and security agreement, as was on the table while Theresa May was Prime Minister? Will the Government convene a summit on saving Ukraine, to begin the process of seizure of frozen Russian assets, so that the UK and our European allies can support Ukraine regardless of the path the US takes?

**John Healey:** We do not need a summit to release the interest on the frozen assets—the corrupt Russian money—as we are doing that already. The Chancellor and I are working closely on that, and we have announced that, from early next year, £2.3 billion will be available for Ukraine for that purpose. I give the hon. Lady the assurance that we will pursue a UK-EU security pact, alongside the deep bilateral agreements we have already started to strike, including the one last month with Germany, which was the most comprehensive defence agreement this country has signed in many years. Finally, the hon. Lady is right—I have argued this before—that at a time of increasing global threats, European nations in NATO must do more of the heavy lifting. We must be prepared to spend more on defence, but we must also be prepared to work together to increase the level of deterrence we can offer to those who would do us harm.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): Was President Trump not right in his first term, when he pushed NATO countries to increase defence spending? The numbers have gone from six countries meeting the 2% target back in 2021, up to 23 countries meeting the target now. Is this not serious, because if President Trump makes decisions on Ukraine in his second term, we might be faced with a choice either to accept those decisions or to step up and ensure Europe's defence ourselves?

**John Healey:** I welcome the fact that 23 NATO nations will hit the 2% spend this year. I regard that as a floor, not a ceiling. The UK, under Governments of both parties, has always spent well above and set the pace for other European countries. We will continue to do that, because European countries in NATO must take on more of the NATO leadership. We are determined that the UK will do that, which is why we have said that our approach to defence will be a NATO-first policy. We will, wherever we can, look to be first in NATO, so that we set the pace on the sort of transformation to the better equipped, better able and more lethal forces that our nations need to deter adversaries and to defend ourselves if required.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): The Secretary of State is right that we used to spend a lot more than 2%: in the 1980s we spent between 4.5% and 5.1% of GDP on defence. Does he share my concern at what I heard on the radio this morning, when a Labour politician in another place was saying that he could see an outcome in Ukraine whereby Russia gets to keep the territory it has occupied, while Ukraine does not get any guarantee of joining NATO but merely some more security assurances? We know what happened last time with the security assurances previously given. Does the Secretary of State agree that, whether we spend 2.5% on defence now or in the near future, it is important that whoever we send to Washington does not capitulate in advance?

**John Healey:** The right hon. Gentleman made the important point, implicitly in his question, that it is the Ukrainians who are fighting and the Ukrainians who will make the call about whether to talk and on what terms. Our task, as one of the leading supporters of Ukraine and its fight for sovereignty, freedom and its own future, is to support it and to step up our support for its fight, and then to step up our support, if necessary and whenever required, in any negotiations, as well as

[John Healey]

to play our part, as we have made the commitment to do, in providing any security guarantees for the longer term.

**Ms Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Russia has gone to war in Europe, starting in Ukraine. It was America and Britain that saved Europe in the last war; it looks like this will be the same. Europe simply must step up. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with Lloyd Austin about America's role in the way forward?

**John Healey:** To be quite honest with my hon. Friend, it is a little early to have discussions with America. It is less than a week since the presidential elections and the current Administration have more than two months to go. As she would expect, I am in detailed discussions with the current Administration and my counterpart there, in particular about how we together, as two of Ukraine's leading allies, can step up our support over the couple of months ahead.

In the future, I expect a President Trump-led Administration to recognise that it is in America's interests, NATO's interests and the interests of all countries that believe in the international rules-based order and a stable and secure peace that Putin does not prevail, because if large countries like Russia are able to redraw international boundaries by force, that sends a signal that undermines the security of all nations. If reports are right that President Trump has already spoken to President Putin and warned him against the escalation that we see from Russia in Ukraine, that is a good first step and early sign.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman knows that I have the highest respect for him, even if we have occasionally clashed across the Floor. I ask him this simple question. In China today, one shipyard building naval vessels is out-building the whole of the United States' naval capability—and it has many hundreds. Given that, and the threat from Russia, Iran and this totalitarian state axis, if Lord Robertson comes back and spells out exactly what I believe he will—that this is the biggest threat we have faced since the cold war—will the right hon. Gentleman not ask but tell the Prime Minister that the No. 1 responsibility is the defence of the realm, with 2.5% now?

**John Healey:** The Prime Minister does not need me to tell him that the first duty of any Government and of this Government is to defend the country and keep our citizens safe. He will not need me for that because he commissioned the strategic defence review; my job is to oversee it successfully. He will not need any persuading of the arguments, assessments of threats and capability recommendations that that strategic defence review, externally led by Lord Robertson, is likely to produce.

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right not to give a scintilla of credibility to the idea that the Conservative party, having spent 14 years never reaching 2.5%, would do that if only it had one more chance. He is also right that what is important is not just identifying more money for defence spending but making sure that we start spending

it better. Can he say any more about what he is doing to ensure that the huge wastage in defence procurement that we saw under the Conservatives is brought into hand under his stewardship?

**John Healey:** I am almost tempted to encourage the shadow Defence Secretary to answer that question, because he was Minister for Defence Procurement until four months ago, so he is principally responsible, for instance, for the fact that only two of the 49 largest defence projects are on time and on budget. He failed to fix what the Public Accounts Committee of this House—an all-party Committee—termed the “broken” procurement system that has been failing our forces and failing British taxpayers. This is a deep task of reform. It is not a glamorous task, but I have made it one of my first priorities as Defence Secretary.

**Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Is the UK able to provide an armoured division to NATO on an enduring basis?

**John Healey:** The armed forces will always respond to the requirements placed on them. We will always seek to fulfil our NATO obligations. One reason why I conducted a NATO test in the first 100 days is that I was concerned that part of the failures of the last 14 years had led to our falling short. That is part of the inheritance that we take on as a new Government. My determination as Defence Secretary is that we make our forces fitter to fight and better able to deter and to play a leading part in NATO, as it steps up our level of deterrence and defence across the 32 nations.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Today, on Armistice Day, we honour those who have served, those who have fought and those who have made the ultimate sacrifice to protect the freedoms we enjoy. Does the Secretary of State agree that today and every day we must remember everything that our armed forces are doing to keep us safe? Will he come to my constituency to meet Sight Scotland Veterans, an incredible charity that provides amazing support to all our visually impaired veterans?

**John Healey:** At the risk of upsetting my diary secretary, I welcome the opportunity to visit my hon. Friend's constituency and her local veterans group. She is right that, today of all days, we remember not just those who gave their lives for the way of life we enjoy today but the serving personnel—the men and women in our armed forces around the world. We currently have 10,000 personnel on operations in 50 different countries around the world. This is a reminder of their work day in, day out to keep us all safe.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Let me assure the Secretary of State that those of us who have followed the defence debate over the last 10, 20 or even 30 years know that he takes these matters extremely seriously and understands the scale of the challenge that we face. In that vein, I encourage him to start telling the truth: that we will have to spend far more than 2.5% of GDP on defence within quite a short number of years. A former Chief of the General Staff has warned that this country might be directly at war within the lifetime of this Parliament. May I suggest that the Secretary of State use his friends throughout



this House to influence both his Government and the Treasury influences on the Conservative side, because we are going to have to bust a gut for a major rearmament programme that we have not seen in this country since the 1930s?

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman has been consistent in his arguments, and I welcome his contribution. The Treasury will have noted it, and will probably take it as an early representation for the next Budget. In the meantime, I will ensure that the strategic defence review starts with the threats that we face: war in Europe, conflict in the middle east and growing threats globally, as well as Russian aggression more widely beyond Ukraine. We will ensure that we are able to match the capabilities that we develop with the threats that we face, and we will do so within the resources that we have available.

**Tim Roca** (Macclesfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) made the important point that the new Government inherited £167 billion-worth of projects, none of which were rated green by the National Audit Office. Does the Secretary of State agree that more money is one part of the equation, but spending it well is the other part?

**John Healey:** Indeed; that is one reason why, early doors in Washington, the Prime Minister not only reaffirmed our iron-clad commitment to increasing defence spending to 2.5% but said that the strategic defence review comes first, as a pathway to 2.5%. That is exactly so that we can ensure that we increase what we spend, but also spend it better.

**Dame Caroline Dinenage** (Gosport) (Con): In 2023, I asked the Secretary of State's colleague, the right hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), who is now the Education Secretary, how Labour's plans for VAT on school fees would impact the continuity of education allowance for forces families. I was told that I

"need not be concerned about what we are discussing today."—  
[*Official Report*, 11 January 2023; Vol. 725, c. 570.]

It is two years on and VAT on school fees goes live in January, but details of the rates of continuity of education allowance still have not been articulated to the forces families in my constituency. As the proud MP for a military constituency, I can tell the Secretary of State that I am concerned and my constituents are concerned. What is the plan to better communicate with them?

**John Healey:** I am sorry that our confirmation of the steps we are taking from January has not reached the hon. Lady. I will ensure that they are. There will be an uprating in the continuity of education allowance, which will ensure that our armed forces who take advantage of the allowance will be able to get up to 90% of the school fees they have to pay covered by that allowance, and that that takes into account any rise in school fees as a result of the VAT being levied.

**Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): The shadow Secretary of State referenced his so-called plan for defence spending back in April this year, a plan that the Institute for Government said did "not add up" and was "fictitious". Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that under this Labour Government we will never make funding commitments to our armed forces unless they are fully funded?

**John Healey:** I do. My hon. Friend is right. The Institute for Fiscal Studies described that so-called plan, the election pitch four weeks before the Conservatives called the election, as "misleading" and an empty promise. I give the House the undertaking that the plans we put in place will be openly discussed in this House. We will ensure that we can match the resources available to our plans.

**Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): Defence professionals across Whitehall will have their heads in their hands at this Government's commitment to 2.5% at some point and when fiscal conditions permit. To fail to commit on defence investment with the multiple security threats facing us, from the Ukraine war to the middle east and a plethora of global cyber-threats, is strategically illiterate. Those threats will not wait for the Chancellor to get a grip, so what urgent steps will the Secretary of State take with the Chancellor to ensure at least the 2.5% promised by the Labour party on defence is spent when the threat assessment demands it, which is now, and not when the Chancellor feels it to be convenient?

**John Healey:** Mr Speaker, I am going to take what I can from the hon. Gentleman, which is an SNP welcome and an urging for an increase in defence spending. That will happen under a Labour Government. The Scottish workforce, the Scottish military and the Scottish-based military will play an important part in the defence of this country in the future.

**Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): We have heard some chutzpah from the shadow Secretary of State for Defence today. The Conservatives had 14 years to get to 2.5%, yet they demand it from us now. I am very pleased that the Secretary of State has set out how we will get towards 2.5% after our strategic defence review, but in the meantime we have to clear up the mess the previous Government left behind. Can he assure the House that he and his colleagues are working to clear up the waste and mismanagement they found when they came to the Ministry of Defence?

**John Healey:** I can indeed. It was one of my predecessors as Defence Secretary who admitted to this House that under 14 years of the previous Government the armed forces had been "hollowed out and underfunded". That is no surprise when we look at the record of the Conservative Government when they came into office in 2010, compared with the record of this Government. Our first Budget has a £3 billion boost to defence. Their first Budget had a £2 billion real-terms cut. Our manifesto had a commitment to increase defence spending to 2.5%. Their first five years in government saw an 18% real cut in defence spending, which laid the foundations for the degradation and the poor state of our armed forces, and the poor state of the finances that we have now inherited.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The last Government extended to state school pupils the undoubted advantage of the combined cadet forces, which had been the almost exclusive prerogative of private school students. Why, then—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. May I ask the right hon. Gentleman to look at me while he is asking his question?

**Dr Murrison:** Why, then, Mr Speaker, did this Government decide, last week of all weeks, to defund combined cadet forces and thus remove the advantages that state school pupils are now enjoying as a result of decisions taken by the last Government?

**John Healey:** I simply do not recognise the right hon. Gentleman's description of any decisions that we have taken, and it would run contrary to what he and I agree is the value of combined cadet forces. Most of us, in our constituencies, have contact and working relations with good cadet forces that give young people opportunities that they simply would not have at school or in any other walk of life. They have an important part to play in the future of individuals, and also in the wider understanding of our armed forces.

**Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's recent announcement of the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill—a promise made and a promise being kept—but does he agree that this is just one part of the puzzle when it comes to showing that we can support our troops as they work to keep us safe?

**John Healey:** Indeed I do. My hon. Friend is a strong champion in his constituency in Scotland for the armed forces and veterans. I greatly valued the visit that I was able to make with him before the election to talk to veterans in his constituency and talk about our plans to increase support in respect of employment, mental health and housing for the future.

**Suella Braverman** (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Con): One of the big achievements of the last 14 years was the delivery of the aircraft carriers, both of which are stationed in Portsmouth, near my constituency. However, it remains clear that they are underpowered. We need more Type 45s, more Type 26s and more Type 31s. If the Government are serious about the 2.5%, when will they set out their plan to invest in our Royal Navy and, in particular, our aircraft carriers, so that our carrier strike group can provide a world-class capability?

**John Healey:** The aircraft carriers constitute an important defence programme. We are considering the threats that we face and the future capabilities that we need as part of the strategic defence review, which will report in the spring, and we will follow that within our clear path and our commitment to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, just as the Chief Secretary to the Treasury told the media yesterday.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Today is Armistice Day, which provides an important moment in which to pause and remember the huge amount that our armed forces have done to keep us safe. On this day, does the Secretary of State agree that we must not only set out our ironclad commitment to 2.5%, but support the armed forces, their families and our veterans?

**John Healey:** Indeed. The forces families who support those who put on the uniform are too often overlooked, which is one reason why we introduced legislation last week for an independent armed forces commissioner, as we promised to do at the election. The holder of this post will report directly to Parliament, will have access to personnel, sites and information, and will be able to

look into the concerns of not just those who serve but the families who support them, in order to improve service life for the future.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): May I commend to the Secretary of State the role of Ploughshare, which is used to deal with the increasing commercialisation of opportunities at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down, in my constituency? In the context of the Ministry's holistic review, which is now under way, will he undertake to ensure that that organisation is not held back from extending its opportunities to commercialise assets emerging from MOD research?

**John Healey:** One of the weaknesses in our system is that the often-excellent innovation, research and development does not get developed, invested in or commercialised, so potentially brilliant small companies do not grow and expand. I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that I am not familiar with Planshare—*[Interruption.]* Ploughshare. I did not even hear the name correctly. If the right hon. Gentleman would like to write to me with some details, I would welcome his letter and certainly have a look.

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Like others on this side of the House, I welcome the increase in defence spending that was announced in the Budget, after years of Tory cuts to our armed forces. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to increase defence spending in response to emerging threats around the world, from Ukraine to the middle east and Asia-Pacific, and that the figure of 2.5% should be kept under review in the light of changing events around the world?

**John Healey:** Yes, I do. My hon. Friend makes the important point that the starting point for any defence planning must be the threats that we face. At the heart of any defence plans must be the people who serve and on whom we depend. I make that heartfelt point particularly forcefully today, on Armistice Day.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): In 2021, when Boris Johnson was Prime Minister, defence spending in the UK was 2.3% of GDP. In 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, defence spending was 2.3% of GDP. Now that an isolationist President-elect is about to go into the White House, defence spending is 2.3% of GDP. When will defence spending rise beyond 2.3% of GDP?

**John Healey:** I am not sure that I heard the hon. Gentleman welcome the fact that this Government have made a commitment to set a path to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP—a level that we have not had in this country for the last 14 years. Everyone agrees that an increase in defence spending is needed, and it is needed in order to deal with precisely the increasing threats that he cites.

**Mr Mark Sowards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Opposition's new-found enthusiasm for meeting the 2.5% defence spending target, especially given that they were not able to meet it even once in 14 years. I gently remind them that the last party in decades to meet the target was the Labour party. Does the

Secretary of State agree that not only do we need to increase our spending to 2.5% of GDP, but we must remain steadfast in our support for the people of Ukraine to protect the entire continent of Europe?

**John Healey:** I do agree. I pay tribute to the last Government for ensuring that the UK led in providing support for Ukraine. As a new Government, we have been determined to continue that over the last four months. We have stepped up the military aid that we are supplying to Ukraine. We have sped up that support in a way that President Zelensky now cites as a model for other countries, and we are now spending more on military aid to Ukraine than ever before—£3 billion this year, next year and every year for as long as it takes, plus the £2.3 billion that we will be able to release from the frozen assets seized from the corrupt regime of Putin's Russia.

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): I would urge the Secretary of State to exercise a little bit of caution when referring to defence spending under the last Labour Government. As someone who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and who used some of the kit and equipment that was issued then, I know that there were some serious concerns at the time, particularly around the Snatch Land Rovers, for example. I spent a lot of time driving around Basra in one of those, and a lot of people lost their lives in those vehicles, so I would exercise a little caution and restraint.

My question is on a different topic: the CEA. How much will meeting the additional cost of VAT cost the MOD from its own budget?

**John Healey:** We will publish the financial figures for the CEA in due course and in the normal way.

On the hon. Gentleman's previous point, I am very conscious of what he and those who served in Afghanistan and Iraq faced. I am very conscious that at times during the last Labour Government, as with any Government, the kit and equipment was lacking. That is why we tried to replace the vehicles, using urgent operational requirements at the time. Although we inevitably fell short in some areas, we were spending 2.5% of GDP on defence in 2010, when we were last in government, and the strength of the full-time British Army was over 100,000 soldiers.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments of hon. and right hon. Members about Armistice Day. During the previous Government, the size of our armed forces shrank from 192,000 to 138,000—a 28% decrease. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it will take this Labour Government to put our defences back on the firm footing that we need in an increasingly dangerous world after many years of underinvestment?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend is right. He is pointing to armed forces numbers and to the heart of a deep, long-running problem: the crisis in recruitment and retention in our forces. Recruitment targets were set every year for 14 years and missed every year for 14 years. We are taking steps to start to deal with this, including through the largest pay rise for our armed forces for over 20 years, so that I can now stand here as the first Defence Secretary to be able to say that all those in uniform are now being paid at least the national living wage. The introduction of an independent armed

forces commissioner to improve service life will start to reset the nation's contract with those who serve and the families that support them.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): Last year, global arms expenditure reached \$2.4 trillion, the highest level since the end of the cold war. UK arms expenditure went up, and it will no doubt go up a lot more because of the statement that the Secretary of State has made today. He rightly mentioned the conflict in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza, and I think he could have mentioned Sudan as well. What actions are he and his Government taking to try to bring about a cessation of those conflicts and of global tension to allow defence expenditure to be reduced globally so that some of that money can be used to deal with the serious environmental and inequality issues that face this planet?

**John Healey:** We cannot wish away the threats, and we cannot wish away the conflicts, which is why it behoves any Government to ensure that we have the armed forces that are capable and equipped to deter those who would do us harm. On the question of conflicts, our support for Ukraine is steadfast. That conflict could be ended today if Putin withdrew from his illegal invasion of that sovereign country. On the middle east, we have argued and worked—in opposition and now in government—for a ceasefire in Gaza that would allow the immediate release of all hostages and the necessary flooding of humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians. That is a first step towards a political process that must be directed towards a two-state solution, which is the only guarantee of long-term peace and security in that region.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): I had the privilege of starting my day in Sheffield, just up the road from the Chicksands base in my constituency, marking Armistice Day with local veterans and the wider community. I welcome today's commitment to ensure that we finally have a credible plan to get to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, but as the Secretary of State has set out, it is about not just what we spend but how we spend it. The last Government spent millions on armed forces accommodation but all too often left the forces in my constituency in shocking situations. Will this Government be different in ensuring that our armed services can finally access the quality of accommodation they deserve on local bases?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend is right. Time and again surveys of armed forces personnel show that poor-quality housing, which would be intolerable in civilian life, is cited as a reason for low morale and an intention to leave the forces early. This is an underlying problem that we will fix. We will not be able to do that overnight but we are determined that we will provide the accommodation and housing that our heroes in uniform have a right to expect.

**David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I completely agree with the Defence Secretary that defence spending must increase to meet the threats we face. Given that the threats are visible and increasing, I found myself nodding in agreement with Admiral Lord West's recent *Guardian* article, in which he said we should be bold and move directly to spending 3% of GDP on defence. Does the Defence Secretary agree with his revered Labour colleague's assertion? If not, why not?



**John Healey:** In our first Budget, we increased next year's defence spending by nearly £3 billion. We have a cast-iron commitment to increasing defence spending to 2.5% of GDP—a level that, over the past 14 years, Conservative Governments simply never matched.

**Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): The Secretary of State rightly refers to R&D spending and small firms, yet small firms in my constituency tell me that spending has dried up. Can he assure me that this is just a blip and that normal flow will resume as soon as possible?

**John Healey:** I think the shadow Secretary of State will agree that one of the necessary reforms to our procurement system, especially in an era in which innovation and technological development will be at an increasing premium, is to do much more to support small and innovative firms, perhaps including some in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. We have to reform our procurement system to ensure that happens, and we will.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answers to all the questions.

I seek an assurance that our spending will focus not only on cyber-security, which is obviously essential, but on recruitment and retention. That spending must take account of the fact that, in April 2024, the Army fell below its target size for the first time since it was set, meaning that all three service branches are currently below target—the Army by 1%, the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines by 5%, and the RAF by 10%. Overall, the UK armed forces were 5,440 personnel, or 1%, below target. We need an assurance on recruitment.

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman sets out some of the details and dimensions of the crisis we face in recruitment and retention. We will start to turn that around, but we will not be able to do so straightaway. We have made a start with proper, fully funded pay awards for our armed forces this year. We are also making a start with new legislation to set up an armed forces commissioner to improve service life. We will take further steps to renew the nation's contract on the support we can offer to those who serve and the families who support them.

## Point of Order

4.22 pm

**James Cartlidge:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You know how strongly the House feels about the Government's decision on the Chagos islands. The Defence Secretary has made it very clear today that the Government know what the cost of that settlement will be to the Ministry of Defence. Many colleagues have repeatedly asked, through oral questions and written questions, what the cost will be. This is public money. Given that the Government refuse to tell us what the cost will be, can you advise us on how else we can probe to find out how much public money will be used?

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman has certainly put that question on the record again, and I am sure the Secretary of State is listening very carefully. He may wish to respond—or perhaps not. I am sure the shadow Secretary of State will not give up at this stage and will find other ways to seek that information, which I am sure will be forthcoming at some point. I am sure he will continue to ask the question.



## Rail Performance

4.23 pm

### **The Secretary of State for Transport (Louise Haigh):**

With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about rail performance. I welcome the shadow Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), to his place. I am sure the Opposition will be interested in what we have to update the House about this afternoon.

After 14 years of neglect, our inheritance was a railway that was failing its passengers, with cancellations at a 10-year high and punctuality that is consistently inconsistent across the network. Back in 2015, cancellations represented around 2% of all services, but thanks to our inheritance of extraordinary failure, that doubled to 4% when the last Government left office. The situation is holding back our economy, stifling our businesses and making life miserable for passengers. That is why, as part of this Government's public service reform agenda, we are pushing ahead with the biggest overhaul of our railways in more than 30 years. I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for this opportunity to update the House on the progress we are making.

As Members will be aware, the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill is making its way through the other place. It will allow the Government to give three months' notice to the first private train operating company to be taken into public ownership, which we will announce as soon as Royal Assent has been achieved. No one has ever pretended that public ownership alone is a silver bullet. The people impacted by delays and cancellations, who can no longer rely on the train to get where they need to, do not care who owns the trains—they care whether they are working or not. Under the model we inherited, no one could argue that they were working, so we will soon launch our consultation setting out plans for unification across the railway.

As part of that, Great British Railways, as the single directing mind, will plan services on a whole-system basis, to better deliver for passengers and freight customers, unlock growth and provide the services a modern, efficient railway should. That will lay the groundwork for the introduction of the railways Bill, later this Session, which will establish Great British Railways and end the fragmentation that has hampered our railways for over 30 years of privatisation.

But we do not want to wait for legislation. The Government are already making improvements and taking steps to deliver reform across the railways. I have appointed Laura Shoaf as chair of shadow Great British Railways, bringing together Network Rail, the publicly owned train operating companies and my Department to drive better integration now. Working with operators already in public ownership, we are seeking to drive savings by eliminating duplication and deliver the improvements that passengers want, such as allowing tickets to be accepted across those TOCs in public ownership during disruption.

Shadow GBR gives us the tools to assess the structure of the timetable, question resource plans and review performance measures and targets. We are using those tools to unlock the punctuality and reliability that passengers deserve across the country. For example, Southeastern is now performing much better. Its cancellations are

low, with its punctuality ranking among the top five operators contracted to my Department, and that level of service will increase by 44 additional trains per day when the timetable is updated in December. That is what shadow Great British Railways is delivering now.

We are demonstrating what integration between track and train can deliver for passengers. Take those who rely on Euston station, for example. Indecision on HS2 left passengers with fewer platforms and greater overcrowding, victims of the so-called "Euston dash". Convening Network Rail and train operators at Euston in the interest of passengers is an excellent example of the benefits that our reform agenda can achieve. Euston now not only has an integrated station management team, but a 100-day plan of rapid improvements that puts the interests of passengers first and individual organisations second. Platform announcements are made earlier, crowding has been reduced and, yes, the advertising screen has been temporarily switched off.

Delays and cancellations were not the only inheritance. For two years, strike followed strike, and disruption followed disruption, in the longest industrial dispute on our railways. I have made it my priority to get around the table, reversing the previous Government's antagonistic approach by resetting industrial relations and settling the pay disputes that saw the country grinding to a halt. I am working with the sector to speed up training and accelerate the driver recruitment pipeline, which will reduce the railway's reliance on rest day working agreements and lower the burden on taxpayers. Settling this saga allows us to move forward with long-overdue negotiations on workforce reform, bringing our railways into the 21st century. That is what moving fast and fixing things looks like.

We are putting passengers first and, today, I can inform the House that since the resolution of the LNER driver dispute, we have seen green shoots emerging, with the number of LNER cancellations falling. Not only have cancellations due to a lack of driver resource dropped to near zero as a direct consequence of getting around the table with unions, but revenue is £15 million higher for the recent rail periods this year versus the same periods last year. Overall cancellations are down from 7% to 5%, and LNER has run 100 more train services in the last four weeks than in the comparable period last year.

Elsewhere, passengers will see a tangible impact on reliability on Northern Rail trains. Thanks to our agreement on rest day working, hundreds more driver shifts have been covered this weekend, cutting cancellations now and in the long run. At TransPennine Express, operator-caused, on-the-day cancellations averaged around 2% in the last year, compared to 5% in the year before it was taken into public ownership. On CrossCountry, we took immediate steps to implement a remedial plan to reduce its cancellations and get services back on track. Its reduced timetable has brought greater stability, and I expect even greater reliability in the long term as the full timetable returns today.

Those are early signs of what happens when a Government get a grip and put passengers at the heart of decision making. Resetting industrial relations is already having a direct impact on better services, but it will take time to pass all the benefits on to passengers. We have to be clear-eyed about the problems, but we are committed to full transparency. I can announce today

[*Louise Haigh*]

that we will be fully transparent with passengers by displaying performance data at stations to demonstrate how the railway is working and to allow the public to hold us to account as we deliver change. That is important, because the railway is a promise—a promise to passengers from the moment they buy a ticket that the train will arrive on time, as the timetable says.

While there are encouraging signs, I am not naive to the reality that passengers will see only a broken promise so long as the departure board shows trains delayed and services cancelled. That is why I have approached the situation with the urgency it demands, including focusing on performance today; bringing together industry to make it clear that improvements that can be made now must be made now; and using every tool at our disposal to drive improvements as fast as possible.

At the same time, the root of the problem grows deeper. Decades of muddled decision making have left the railway fragmented. We have tolerated an unworkable system of track in one organisation and trains in another for decades too long. This Government will turn the page on that chapter of fragmentation. I have wasted no time in kick-starting the long-term reform that our railway desperately needs. We have wasted no time in bringing train operating companies under public ownership. As today's figures show, we have wasted no time in getting around the table with unions and making change happen now. That is what moving fast and fixing things looks like, and I commend this statement to the House.

**Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for sharing an advance copy. I agree that rail performance is a key concern to passengers throughout the country, and it is a fair criticism to say that several operators have consistently underperformed. That is why, when we were in government, we took action to improve performance on our railways, investing more than £100 billion to operate and enhance our railways since 2010, and electrifying more than 1,200 miles of track—compared to just 63 miles under the last Labour Government.

I am glad that the Government are taking forward the framework offered in the previous Conservative Government's Williams-Shapps review. Having a more joined-up rail network should indeed deliver key improvements. However, it is disappointing that the Government have progressed with their plans for the effective nationalisation of the rail operators by ending private rail operator franchising, despite all the evidence pointing to the fact that that will be contrary to the aim of improving rail performance.

We know that while in some cases it has been necessary in the short term to bring rail operators into public control, it has not made the difference in performance that the Government would have us believe. It takes only a cursory glance at passenger rail performance statistics to see that some of the rail operators operating under public control have done little or nothing to improve cancellations or delays in relation to other operators. For example, the Secretary of State mentioned TransPennine Express and a decrease in cancellations since the operator was taken into public ownership, but she made no reference to delays. Data from the Office for Rail and Road show that in the four years prior to

the train operator coming under public control, passengers faced an average of 8,130 delay minutes per month. From period 2 of 2023-24, when the operator was brought into public ownership, up to period 4 of 2024-25, average monthly delays have increased by 1,677 minutes, to 9,807 a month. In addition, for the year '23-24, data shows that train operators run by private companies in England had an average on time rate of 64.36%. For train operators in public control, by contrast, the average was 57.7%—a difference of just under seven percentage points.

Public ownership is not the panacea that the right hon. Lady claims, so it is disingenuous for the Government to argue that wholesale public control of rail operation will do everything to improve performance, particularly for operators that are already performing well. Under the Government's plans to end private rail operator franchising, the first contracts set to expire and be picked up by the Government are some of the highest performing franchises. The Government risk making the mistake of taking credit for comparatively strong performance, which will occur not as a result of their measures but as a result of the successes of the previous private franchising. That would mean the Government drawing the wrong conclusions from their actions, and it would have implications for future decision making.

It should be appreciated that the role of open access operators has been one of the greatest success stories within our rail network. It is therefore incumbent on the Government to provide greater clarity to the sector on how their plans for the rail network will impact on open access operators. It is also essential that the Secretary of State finally clarifies the long-term plan for rolling stock under the Government's measures.

I appreciate that in Labour's brave new world, all decisions are reflected through the ideological prism of "public good, private bad", but there is a fundamental risk that the Government are taking ideological action to the long-term detriment of rail performance. Among our counterparts in Europe, it is widely acknowledged that rail privatisation has been successful in increasing passenger numbers, encouraging investment and controlling costs. In Italy, for example, prices have reduced by 31%, and Austria has witnessed a 41% increase in service frequency. There is a serious risk that the Government's plans will take us backwards on those key areas without offering any promise of improvement on performance, or improved journeys or fares for passengers.

We all fully acknowledge the difficulties facing our railways, and nobody should accept poor performance—we have, unfortunately, seen that in some areas of our network—but merely enacting demonstrative but counterintuitive measures designed to communicate action is no substitute for making measured and pragmatic choices. For example, the Government and the Secretary of State have chosen to offer inflation-busting pay rises with no working practice reform in exchange. Without substantial working practice reform, it is deeply unlikely that the cost of the pay deals will be offset by improved performance, and the failure to introduce working practice reform will mean continued performance difficulties on our railways.

Can the Secretary of State offer a guarantee today that ending private rail franchising without implementing working practice reform will lead to demonstrably improved performance? If she cannot offer that guarantee,

the Government should shelve the ideology and take a step back to pause and examine whether their package of measures will truly improve rail performance. It surely makes more sense to learn from the performance statistics; to understand from the experience of the continent and our past the improvements that the private sector can bring; and to prioritise the practical over the ideological.

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for acknowledging that we provided the statement in advance, and I suggest that next time he reads it before he responds. He will have heard me say that public ownership is not a silver bullet, hence why we are setting out a substantial package of reforms. As I also mentioned, that includes substantial workforce reform, including developing training policies—that is one of the ways in which the recruitment of drivers has been really held back—and reducing reliance on rest day working agreements.

The shadow Minister might also want to check the latest statistics on TransPennine Express. It had the largest increase in punctuality of any operator contracted to my Department, including all those in private ownership. We have been clear that open access should continue where it does not abstract revenue from the overall network and where there is capacity. There have been good examples, such as Lumo and Grand Central, and we are very happy to continue working with them. We will publish a long-term rolling stock plan in due course.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Chair of the Transport Committee.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Transport Secretary's statement is hugely welcome. Bringing privately owned train operating companies into public ownership as well as setting up GBR will inevitably add to her Department's workload, so what preparations is she making to manage that additional workload?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful that my hon. Friend is concerned about my work-life balance—so am I. We are staffing up the operator of last resort, as it is currently known—we will shortly change its name, as it will no longer be the operator of last resort—and the Department has significantly increased its capability. Under the previous Administration, no one in government took responsibility for the running of the railways. We are taking a very deliberately different approach and, as passengers-in-chief, we will ensure that both the operator of last resort and the Department are sufficiently staffed up to manage the quick and successful transition of franchises into public ownership.

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

**Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. I also welcome the new shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), to his position.

The Lib Dems welcome the Secretary of State's statement that performance is improved, and commuters and businesses are relieved that industrial action has been curtailed. It is disappointing, however, that the unions

were not required to agree any meaningful improvements to productivity as part of the settlement. Clearly, we are not yet out of the woods—or perhaps I should say the tunnel. Under the Conservatives, delays, cancellations and overcrowding became commonplace. Last year, more than 55,000 rush hour trains were either partly or fully cancelled—a 10% rise on the previous year, and the worst of any year since 2019. Although the latest news is welcome, there are many miles left to go on this journey. The Government's policy of nationalisation is, as the Secretary of State herself concedes, no silver bullet. Earlier this year, the Office of Rail and Road found that four of the eight least reliable operators, with the highest cancellation rates, were public, while the three most reliable operators, with the lowest cancellation rates, were private.

I have three questions for the Secretary of State. First, what steps is she taking to ensure that the worst, rather than the best, private operators are nationalised first? Secondly, where a private operator's performance is of a higher standard than that in the public sector, will she consider extending its contract? Finally, given the still shocking level of accessibility on much of the network, will she urgently provide an update on when the stalled Access for All programme will be back on track?

**Louise Haigh:** To confirm, we are working with the trade unions at the moment on productivity improvements. We are clear that some of the practices in place on the railways are not acceptable or fit for modern and efficient railways. In the pay deal, there was a side letter and agreement to work through training improvements, and we want to ensure that that is delivered. The previous Government's approach meant that they not only failed to deliver any workforce reform improvements, but presided over the longest industrial dispute in our railways' history, costing the taxpayer and passengers hundreds of millions of pounds.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that cancellations are high in the publicly owned TOCs. That is a result not least of the fact that the ones that are in public ownership were already the worst performing, and we need to look at how they have improved under public ownership. The real benefits will be brought about under Great British Railways, when we will be truly able to integrate track and train and deliver those improvements. We will set out the schedule for bringing the private TOCs into public ownership once Royal Assent has been given to the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill, but the right balance must be struck between performance and return for the taxpayer, because we are spending hundreds of millions of pounds in dividend payouts and management fees.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to mention the Access for All programme and accessibility, which has not been good enough under Network Rail. I am happy to write to him about specific stations in the programme.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Everyone is praising my right hon. Friend to the heavens now that High Speed 2 will end at Euston. She is welcome to Old Oak Common in my constituency any time to have a look-see at progress there. However, can she help to fix the daily delays that constituents are



[Dr Rupa Huq]

facing on Crossrail? West Ealing and Acton Main Line are getting a worse service than they were before all this. We want to build, build, build, but people in new homes need to be able to travel.

**Louise Haigh:** The day when everyone is praising me to the heavens on HS2 is one I look forward to. As my hon. Friend knows, brand-new Elizabeth line trains are on order; the Mayor of London was awarded a £485 million capital settlement in the Budget partly for those trains, which are being produced at Alstom in Derby. That will significantly reduce the overcrowding and delays that she talks about. The Department works with the Mayor of London very closely on addressing those delays.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House and updating us, because it gives her an opportunity to correct the record. She may have inadvertently misled the House at the last Transport questions about the Birmingham to Hereford line and West Midlands Railways' performance. Back in May, a terrible one in 10 of those services was being cancelled, but by October when Transport questions took place, one in six Birmingham to Hereford services was being cancelled. Will the Secretary of State commission her officials to talk to representatives from West Midlands Railways about that line, and find a way to move fast and fix that service?

**Louise Haigh:** Either the Rail Minister or I will of course seek to meet representatives of West Midlands Trains to address its performance.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Select Committee member Laurence Turner.

**Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): The shadow Secretary of State said that we should pay attention to performance statistics. The figures that I have obtained from the Department show that over the past seven years, there was a 35% increase in temporary and emergency speed restrictions on the network. The Secretary of State has a difficult inheritance, but can she set out for us the work that she is doing to refocus the industry on the hard graft of understanding, maintaining and improving our crumbling infrastructure?

**Louise Haigh:** Shadow Great British Railways brings together the Department, Network Rail, and those operators that are already in public ownership to look at integration and ensure that our investment in the network delivers improvements for passengers as quickly and efficiently as possible. That work will absolutely cover maintaining the network, and we will set out how we will do so in the next control period, as we look towards the second phase of the spending review.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I welcome the gusto with which the Secretary of State approaches her work, and in particular her motto, which is "Move fast and fix things." Has she spoken to Network Rail recently? Its motto seems to be "Move slow and break things", at least in Oxford, given the way it has mismanaged the Oxford train station upgrade. For the second Christmas in a row, businesses along the Botley Road will not be open. We have a meeting later this week with those businesses, and I have asked for a

meeting with the Rail Minister, but he seems too busy. Would the Secretary of State give me just a moment of her time, so that I can work with her on how we can move forward? This is not acceptable, is it?

**Louise Haigh:** I completely empathise, and agree that the situation in Oxford is not good enough. The hon. Lady's characterisation of Network Rail is partly why it is being abolished as we establish Great British Railways. I will of course meet her to discuss how we can improve the situation.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I welcome the Transport Secretary's comments today, and her emphasis on good industrial relations in the rail industry. Why does she think that this Labour Government were able to work with trade unions such as ASLEF to end the national strikes, improving services for passengers within weeks of taking office, when the previous Conservative Government were unable to do so over several years?

**Louise Haigh:** The truth is that the previous Government deliberately provoked and prolonged that strike, the longest in the history of our railways. They budgeted for a pay settlement not far off where we landed, and that pay settlement has already paid for itself through increased revenue and improved services for passengers.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Chiltern Railways was absent from the Secretary of State's statement, but when it comes to rail performance, for my constituents—both those on the Chiltern main line and those on the Aylesbury branch—daily overcrowding is a reality, with passengers often being left on the platform. Given that the previous Government stepped up, with a commitment to ensuring that Chiltern got more rolling stock to tackle the overcrowding challenges, will the Secretary of State make it a double priority to get Chiltern those extra trains and end this overcrowding?

**Louise Haigh:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Chiltern was the worst-performing operator last year, in terms of the reduction in punctuality, which further makes the case for public ownership. The previous Government made lots of commitments, few of which were funded, but I will take that question away and determine where the rolling stock order is.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Select Committee member Catherine Atkinson.

**Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's success in ending national industrial disputes as a first step to delivering better services for rail passengers. Does she agree that the establishment of Great British Railways in Derby represents a further positive step in getting Britain moving again? Can she update the House on the governance framework for shadow Great British Railways, and how it will work with stakeholders on functions such as producing a business plan?

**Louise Haigh:** I was delighted to be in Derby recently to confirm that the headquarters of Great British Railways will be in that rail city. I am also delighted that, as I say, Alstom is manufacturing the new Elizabeth line trains,



as a consequence of funding awarded in the Budget. Shadow GBR is really important for engaging with stakeholders and, crucially, putting passengers at the heart of developing a new culture—and a new organisation, in Great British Railways. It has the expert chairing of Laura Shoaf, who brings substantial planning and transport experience from her time as chief executive of West Midlands combined authority.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Select Committee member Rebecca Smith.

**Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): It has recently been brought to my attention that in Great Western Railway, which serves my constituency in Devon, drivers do not have contracts that ensure a seven-day-a-week service—the contracts do not include Sundays, so trains are regularly cancelled. In fact, four trains were cancelled yesterday, so one lady had been forced to catch the first train today instead. What plans does the Secretary of State have to equalise driver contracts under Great British Railways, to ensure that routes such as Paddington to Devon are fully staffed seven days a week, so that she can fulfil her promise to passengers?

**Louise Haigh:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and unfortunately that is the picture across too much of our railways. The workforce terms and conditions are simply not fit for purpose. Part of our inheritance is that we do not have a workforce that can deliver a modern and efficient railway. We are working with Great Western Railway to address that egregious issue, and we will come back to the House shortly to set out our progress.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Select Committee member Dr Scott Arthur.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and for the leadership that she is showing to get our railways back on track—sorry for the pun. I am pleased that she mentioned LNER and Lumo, which do a fantastic job of connecting Edinburgh and London, and of providing a stress-free alternative to flying. When she first took up her post, she was clear that she wanted HS2 to get a grip of costs. Does she feel vindicated, given the reports over the weekend of more than £100 million being spent on a single structure, despite some of those involved saying that they were not aware of the need for it?

**Louise Haigh:** It was extraordinarily frustrating to see the news of the obscene amounts of money spent on that structure to do with HS2. That happened under HS2's previous leadership. We are resolving this by bringing in Mark Wild imminently to lead the organisation, and we are also resolving issues around cost control and governance through James Stewart's governance review of HS2. These things happened under the previous Government, and fortunately the electorate resolved that issue for us on 4 July.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): After a weekend of cancellations at Windermere, Oxenholme and elsewhere, will the Secretary of State have a word with Northern Rail, to remind it that it is meant to run a rail service on a Sunday? Will she also speak to Avanti—many hon. Members may agree with me on this and

have the same experience—because services from London Euston to Glasgow Central are habitually stopped at Preston, even when the track is clear all the way to the Scottish border and beyond? It harms my constituents at Oxenholme, and those in Penrith, Lancaster and Carlisle.

**Louise Haigh:** I have routine conversations with Northern Rail, as the hon. Gentleman would imagine. The most recent was on Thursday. We facilitated a new rest day working agreement with it, which has significantly reduced driver cancellations, but there is an outstanding issue with conductors; there is a very similar situation with Great Western. In parts of Northern Rail, particularly in the north-west, Sundays are not included in the working week. That has led to an unacceptable amount of cancellations, which we are working to resolve. I will raise the issue of stopping at Preston with Avanti separately.

**Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): Doncaster has a long and historic relationship with the railways; we are home to both the Mallard and the Flying Scotsman. The financial sustainability and success of rail are critical to our local economy, so can the Secretary of State update the House on the net cost of the solution that she brokered to end the strikes?

**Louise Haigh:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The strikes were costing us £20 million a day in lost revenue. That is aside from the economic impact of people coming off the railways and not making journeys to work, to see friends and family or to visit other towns and cities. Settling the pay disputes that were pervading our railways has already paid for itself.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What lessons has the Secretary of State drawn from rail networks in other countries about rail performance and safety, given that many of them are now automated? Will she make herself a heroine in the south-west by dealing at long last with the notorious Tisbury loop, west of Salisbury, which has added inestimable time to rail journeys to the far south-west? The situation could be resolved at very little cost.

**Louise Haigh:** I will look into the issue for the right hon. Gentleman. It may be that the Rail Minister has to make himself a hero; I will ask him to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter.

**Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): They say that money doesn't grow on trees, but apparently it flies out the window for £100 million bat caves. Does my right hon. Friend agree that HS2 should apologise for its fur-brained scheme? How can we quickly learn the lessons to ensure good taxpayer value for money as HS2 continues?

**Louise Haigh:** I was absolutely horrified, on entering the Department, to learn that there had been no routine ministerial oversight, in any sense of the word, of HS2 for some time. We immediately established a cross-ministerial taskforce, comprising me and the Treasury, to oversee HS2's costs. I have written to the chair to make it clear that, beyond safety, his first and abiding priority is to bring down costs. I have commissioned a governance review, led by James Stewart. We will look

[*Louise Haigh*]

at the structure of HS2 Ltd, which has been too much at arm's length, and too free to spend taxpayers' money for too long.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): GWR, which serves my Bath constituency, has been performing in the most disappointing way, to say the least. Especially on Sundays, cancellations and delays are the new norm. Engineering works are among the problems, but the train driver shortage is the biggest problem. What exactly will resolving what the Secretary of State calls the rest day working issue mean for my constituents? When does she expect them to see tangible change?

**Louise Haigh:** The problem across the entire railway is that we do not have sufficient drivers or staff, so too many parts of the railways are reliant on rest day working agreements. We should not have to rely on people volunteering to come on shift in order to run a Sunday service, but unfortunately that is the case at Great Western Railway. We will not be harmonising contracts or terms and conditions at Great British Railways, as we have established, but we need to get drivers and conductors on modern terms and conditions that reflect the railway that we need. We are attempting to address the specific issue at Great Western Railway; as I say, we will come back to the House soon with an update on progress.

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): At a recent meeting with me to discuss rail improvements for my constituents, the chief executive of Southeastern—a nationalised company, as has been confirmed—was able to confirm that additional services between Dartford and central London are due to commence in December, as the Secretary of State mentioned. Can she outline any additional welcome improvements to services in the south-east, or other parts of the country, to which we can look forward?

**Louise Haigh:** We will see 44 additional trains per day on the new timetable from Southeastern. CrossCountry restored its full timetable today, and we hope to see new timetables from TransPennine Express in the coming weeks. We have procurements out for TransPennine Express and Southeastern, I believe, so my hon. Friend will see new rolling stock in due course.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): People can only go so far out of London into the Spelthorne constituency on their Oyster card; they have to buy a train ticket for the last couple of stops. This anomalous situation means that major employers such as BP and Shepperton Studios send buses up the line to pick up their workers to do a day's work. The Secretary of State will soon be the proud owner of South Western Railway, Transport for London and Great British Railways, so can she please make herself an absolute hero in Spelthorne and get it into the Oyster zone?

**Louise Haigh:** The Mayor of London is the owner of Transport for London, but we can absolutely work together to see whether anything of that nature can be achieved. I see no reason why we cannot make progress on that issue.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): Commuters at Arlesey and Hitchin stations in my constituency are driven to despair by the shocking state of Thameslink services, with delays and cancellations an all too frequent feature of everyday commutes. I welcome the urgency with which the Secretary of State is starting to tackle the long-term causes, from industrial disputes to fragmentation. In the interim, will she meet me to discuss how we can push Thameslink to do more to make sure we finally make these delays and cancellations a thing of the past?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful for those comments. Govia Thameslink had an improvement of 3% in its cancellations on last year, but it is still falling behind on punctuality.<sup>1</sup> I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss what more we can do.

**Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State's update on how the UK Government are following in the Scottish Government's footsteps by nationalising train operating companies, but Labour cannot claim to be nationalising the railways while leaving the trains in private hands. Even with the passage of her Bill, profits will continue to flow out of our railways to rolling stock companies, some based in tax havens, rather than be reinvested in services and infrastructure, and consequently in performance. Will the Secretary of State set out when she plans to bring forward proposals to nationalise the rolling stock companies and bring the railways back into public hands in their entirety?

**Louise Haigh:** One of the purposes of this reform was to save the taxpayer money, and bringing operators into public ownership as their contracts expire means there will be no compensation. We will also be saving the money currently leaking out of the system through dividends and management fees. It would not be fiscally prudent in the current environment to spend billions of pounds on nationalising the rolling stock, so we will continue the current arrangement whereby private finance is leveraged into rolling stock companies.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): My constituents are reliant on a train line between Reading and Waterloo that has seen no improvements to frequency or journey times since the 1970s, so they will warmly welcome the steps the Secretary of State has outlined today to launch a consultation setting out plans for unification across the railway. Does she agree that a modern railway system is an essential step in getting our economy growing?

**Louise Haigh:** I absolutely agree. For too long, passengers have not been able to rely on the railways, and it has driven people off them. We see in the latest Transport Focus data that people are gradually starting to feel more confident in using the railways, but we have a long way to go to turn the tide on the last 14 years of failure.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Improved rail performance is of course welcome, but my constituents in Somerton and Langport are not served by the railway at all. A family in Curry Rivel recently wrote to me; they are over half an hour away from the nearest train station, leaving them isolated from the train line. Will the Minister outline any plans she has to connect my constituents in rural areas to the railway?

1. [Official Report, 25 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 8WC.] (Correction)

**Louise Haigh:** We will be setting out a long-term infrastructure strategy in spring next year, working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and colleagues across Government to ensure that we are unlocking the transport infrastructure that will be of benefit and allow us to meet our housing targets but also improve rural connectivity. My Department is also reforming how we do appraisals to ensure we maximise our investment in transport infrastructure for economic growth and to tackle socioeconomic inequality.

**Mr Mark Sowards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's decisive action to end industrial action, get the railways moving again and unlock the barriers to economic growth that we absolutely need to sweep away to get this country growing again. It is particularly welcome to hear about the green shoots of recovery and the improvements in LNER's performance. However, passengers at Morley train station tell me that the services are still unreliable, so can the Secretary of State update the House on what she will do to improve the reliability of the train services running through Leeds South West and Morley and the rest of the UK?

**Louise Haigh:** LNER's reliability has improved in the past year, but I am not naive and do not think we are there yet; these are only the green shoots of recovery. The real improvements from these reforms will come when we can truly integrate track and train. LNER and the east coast are a perfect example of where the previous system was failing. Billions of pounds were spent on upgrading the east coast main line, but with absolutely no improvement for passengers. By integrating track and train, we can ensure that those upgrades to the east coast main line are fully realised for passengers and that the timetable and service from LNER are improved.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): My constituents have to rely on two of the most unreliable train operating companies: Northern and TransPennine Express. Too many of them are having to drive to get to work on time or get a taxi to get back in time for after-school club. When does the Secretary of State think my constituents will have the confidence to go back to using the train, rather than relying on an app on their phone?

**Louise Haigh:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Northern and TransPennine Express serve my constituency as well, and some of the most deprived parts of the north of England. Performance has not been good enough. TransPennine in particular has seen insignificant improvements since it was brought into public ownership, but neither operator is where it needs to be. We are working closely with them as a priority through the operator of last resort, not only to drive efficiencies, but crucially to drive performance. I was struck when I met Network Rail and some of the managing directors of the worst-performing operating companies that they made it clear that the previous levels of performance had simply been tolerated and accepted as normal across the industry. They are under no doubt that under this Government, that level of performance will no longer be tolerated.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): My constituents in Calder Valley are also sick of the performance of Northern Rail. In July, the Department for Transport issued a breach of notice to Northern Rail, because of

its underperformance. Northern Rail's chief operating officer said that performance was "not good enough". Will my right hon. Friend confirm that she will prioritise getting Northern Rail back on track?

**Louise Haigh:** We can hear from the House how much of an impact the levels of service on Northern Rail are having. Andy Burnham texts me every Monday about the performance on Northern trains, so I can assure my hon. Friend that it is a priority.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Earlier this year, Avanti West Coast services on the north Wales main line had on-the-day cancellations of more than 20%. Its timetable is yet to return to pre-covid standards, and there were no direct connections with London on Saturday. Given that the Avanti West Coast contract runs to 2026, what is the Secretary of State doing to ensure a reliable mainline service for the people of north Wales?

**Louise Haigh:** My views on Avanti's performance are well known, I think. The right hon. Lady is absolutely right that it has not been acceptable. Shockingly, the way that national rail contracts were written under the previous Government means that Avanti has not defaulted. It is on a remedial plan to drive improvements, and we have seen a small increase in punctuality, but it still has a long way to go. We are watching over Avanti like a hawk to make sure that if it does default, it can be immediately brought into public ownership.

**Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I extend my thanks to the Secretary of State and the team for the early action they have taken to improve the reliability of the network. My constituents struggle with two lines. One is the Cumbrian coast line, on which I ask the Secretary of State for any update on the ongoing conductors' dispute. That is adding to a lack of reliability in the system for those in Whitehaven and Workington and elsewhere. I spend too much time—far too much time—on Avanti West Coast services, which gives me the opportunity to speak to constituents who cannot use the wi-fi, because it is highly unreliable. It is a big issue for productivity, so will the Secretary of State raise that with Avanti when she meets its representatives?

**Louise Haigh:** Wi-fi is one of the examples of passenger experience that we are clear needs to be delivered through Great British Railways. I take East Midlands Railway, and the wi-fi is even worse on that line. I would be happy to raise that issue with Avanti. We are in the process of attempting to facilitate an agreement with Northern on the conductor issue that my hon. Friend mentions in the north-west, which has the most egregious example of working terms and conditions being outside of a normal working week.

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): I join the chorus of those talking about GWR's shocking Sunday service. Its timetable is a work of fiction akin to "Chuggington", which I often watch with my daughter. Were that the only problem that my constituents faced, we might be able to look past it. However, the lack of carriages on trains home on a weekday is a huge problem—my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) recently used some choice language about it, which I



[Max Wilkinson]

urge hon. Members to look up online; I will not report it in the House. We often find that there are only half the carriages that we need to get home. I recently stood by the loo for 90 minutes until Stroud, which was an unpleasant experience shared by many others on the train. What will the Secretary of State do to reassure me that GBR will solve that problem?

**Louise Haigh:** Again, the current fragmentation of the network means that we have dozens of different types of rolling stock across the network, all procured by different operators at different times, which are not interoperable between operators and cannot be moved around the network precisely when there are issues such as those that the hon. Gentleman described. With the establishment of Great British Railways and a long-term rolling stock strategy, we can procure fewer types of trains and start to move them around. I will take away the specific issue of short-form trains on Great Western Railway and write to him about what action can be taken.

**Mr Richard Quigley** (Isle of Wight West) (Lab) *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Richard Quigley, can you confirm that you were here at the beginning of the Secretary of State's statement?

**Mr Quigley:** No, I was not.

**Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and particularly the sentiment about putting passengers first and getting a grip. Those who are served by Great Western, which runs to south Wales as well as down the main line to Penzance in my constituency—Great Western has already been heavily criticised this afternoon—will be aware that we are getting none of the benefits of HS2 but a lot of the disruption as a result of the work at Old Oak Common. Will the Secretary of State meet those Members of Parliament who are worried about the prospect of six years of sometimes severe disruption to their services to see whether we can minimise the impact?

**Louise Haigh:** I am conscious of the disruption that will be experienced by passengers coming from the south-west. We are putting in place plans so that trains

can come into Euston rather than Paddington, but it is undeniable that there will be substantial disruption during the Old Oak Common works. I or the Rail Minister will be happy to meet colleagues who are affected.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call Richard Quigley—honesty goes a long way.

**Mr Quigley:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I truly am grateful. I was going to say that my train was late, but that would not actually be true. [Laughter.]

Speaking of my right hon. Friend being a heroine, finding a solution to the Isle of Wight ferries issue would result in our erecting a bronze statue on the seafront in Cowes. Does she agree that the Conservatives' failed experiment with rail privatisation has caused passengers misery and cost millions? What will she do to make things better?

**Louise Haigh:** I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing my hon. Friend to ask a question. I thought he would mention the ferries as well—he also texts me often about the ferries. I am grateful for his point. The new model will deliver not only better services for passengers but a far better settlement for taxpayers, who have been ripped off under the previous model for far too long.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for her statement. She has been clear that transparency for passengers will be achieved by displaying performance data. How do the Government intend to ensure that, as well as knowing whether their local line is not doing well, passengers know that their taxes are being used not simply to pay rail staff higher wages, but to get trains to reach their destinations in a time-effective and cost-effective way?

**Louise Haigh:** The purpose of displaying performance data at stations is to give passengers certainty and transparency about the state of the railways, but Great British Railways will also be far more accountable than under the current system. At the moment, to hold the railways to account, there is a complicated mix of responsibility between Network Rail, the train operating companies and the Department for Transport. Great British Railways will provide a single point of access to the railways for politicians and for communities, and we will be able to ensure that the organisation is single-mindedly delivering for passengers.

## Rural Affairs

5.14 pm

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered rural affairs.

I am delighted that the House has this opportunity to discuss the impact of the Budget on rural communities. Let me begin by addressing what the Budget means for farming in the round. We can all agree that food security is national security, which is why we have secured the biggest budget in our country's history for sustainable food production and nature's recovery. It commits £5 billion to the agricultural budget over the next two years. We are continuing all the environmental land management schemes, and investing £1.8 billion into them from 2025-26, which gives farmers the stability they need and lays the foundations for sustainable food production, to protect farmers and the environment for years to come.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** What estimate has the right hon. Gentleman made of the impact on capital investment, which will be reduced as farmers consider the inheritance tax implications of those investments and adjust their plans accordingly?

**Steve Reed:** The changes have been signed off by the Office for Budget Responsibility and the full impact assessment will be available when the Finance Bill is published, before they come into force in 2026.

**Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con):** Does the Secretary of State understand that a farmer coming towards the end of his career is hardly likely to invest either in improving his land or in the hundreds of thousands of pounds that a piece of agricultural plant costs these days, knowing that there will be a surcharge when, sadly, he deceases?

**Steve Reed:** The vast majority of farmers will be unaffected by the changes, so that point will not apply.

We are also rapidly releasing £60 million to support farmers whose farms have been devastated by severe flooding. That is £10 million more than the previous Government were offering and, unlike their fantasy figures, we have shown where the money to be paid out will come from. Flooding is just one of the many challenges that farmers have faced over the past year.

**Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con) *rose*—**

**Steve Reed:** Perhaps the hon. Gentleman wants to allude to another of them.

**Simon Hoare:** The Secretary of State has painted the most rosy picture. Why does he think that no one in the farming community can see it or share it?

**Steve Reed:** I have not had time to paint much of a rosy picture yet, because I have only just started and I am taking quite a lot of interventions, but I hope I can allay the concerns of some farmers in the comments that I hope to make during my speech.

**Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con) *rose*—**

**Steve Reed:** I will take one more intervention and then make some progress.

**Sir Roger Gale:** The right hon. Gentleman referred to the amount of money being made available for flooding. The devastation caused by flooding pales into insignificance compared with the damage that will be done by inheritance tax. This weekend a farmer in my constituency has cancelled the building of a new barn because of it. Park home owners in my area are in despair as a result of what the Budget is doing to them. Does the right hon. Gentleman not understand that?

**Steve Reed:** The vast majority of farmers will not be affected by the changes to inheritance tax, and I implore the right hon. Gentleman not to underplay the damage caused by flooding. Many farms were absolutely devastated last year, and it will be immensely welcome that we have released £60 million to help farmers to deal with that problem, as well as setting up a flood resilience taskforce to ensure far better co-ordination between the centre and the agencies on the ground, to protect farmers from the devastation of flooding in years to come.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—**

**Steve Reed:** I said that I had taken my last intervention, but since it is the hon. Gentleman I am happy to give way.

**Jim Shannon:** I have been inundated with messages from farmers back home. I am a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union, so I understand the issues clearly. The National Farmers Union here on the mainland has the same point of view. Every one of my neighbours will be impacted, and the Ulster Farmers' Union estimates that almost every farmer in Northern Ireland will be impacted by the inheritance tax changes. Is the Secretary of State prepared to meet Ulster Farmers' Union representatives to discuss this matter and understand much better—I say that respectfully—the issue of inheritance tax and what it means to family farms in Northern Ireland? It will destroy them.

**Steve Reed:** It is very important that we all listen to farmers and farmers' representatives. Either I, or one of my ministerial colleagues, will make sure that we meet the representatives the hon. Gentleman mentions. I hope that I can allay some of those concerns if I am able to continue my speech, in which I will directly address the issues to which he referred.

As I was saying, flooding is just one of the many challenges that farmers have faced over the last past year. In recent weeks I have met farmers who have been hit by bluetongue in their herds, and I am sorry to say that we have the first recorded case of avian influenza this autumn. Biosecurity threats are real and their impacts even more so, which is why we are investing over £200 million to protect the nation from potential disease outbreaks, including by fixing the defences at our world-leading Weybridge facility that the Conservatives left to fall into disrepair.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): I commend the Secretary of State's broad approach. In my constituency there is a serious issue with precious flood plains being speculatively bought by developers, which is causing a huge amount of concern to local residents. It is also an issue in terms of the potential threat to wildlife habitats and of the impact on flooding. Will the Secretary of State consider meeting me and local residents to discuss this important matter?

**Steve Reed:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for his community. I am of course more than happy to meet him and people from his community to discuss those important issues.

The measures in the Budget will enable us to build a stronger, more sustainable future for British agriculture and put in place our new deal for farmers, which includes making the supply chain fairer so that producers are no longer forced to sell their food below the price of production; speeding up planning decisions to help farmers to diversify into new forms of income; seeking a new veterinary agreement—

**Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Steve Reed:** If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I want to make a little progress.

The new deal for farmers includes seeking a new veterinary agreement with the EU to tear down the export barriers that the previous Government erected in the first place; backing British produce by using the Government's purchasing power to buy British; and protecting our farmers from ever again being undercut by low welfare and low standards in trade deals like the disastrous one the previous Government signed with Australia and New Zealand.

The House is aware that the Government inherited a catastrophic £22 billion black hole in the nation's finances, meaning we have had to take tough decisions on tax, welfare and spending to protect the payslips of working people. This has required reforms to agricultural property relief. I recognise that many farmers are feeling anxious about the changes; I urge them not to believe every alarming claim or headline and I reassure them that the Government are listening to them. We are committed to ensuring the future of family farms. The vast majority of farmers will not be affected at all by the changes. Let us look at the detail.

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Steve Reed:** If the hon. Gentleman will give me a little time, it is important that I make these points.

Currently, 73% of agricultural property relief claims are less than £1 million. An individual farm owner can pass on up to £1.5 million and a couple can pass on up to £3 million between them to a direct descendant, free of inheritance tax. If a couple who own a farm want to pass it on to a younger relative and one partner predeceases the other, each of them has a £1 million APR threshold that they can pass on. Add those together and that is £2 million, plus the £1 million that a couple with a property can pass on to their children. For most people, that is an effective threshold of up to £3 million to pass

on without incurring inheritance tax. Any liability beyond that will be charged at only half the standard inheritance tax rate and payment can be phased over 10 years to make it more affordable. Farmers will be able to pass down their family farm to future generations, just as they always have done.

**Harriet Cross:** Will the Secretary of State tell us where he obtained those figures?

**Steve Reed:** They are from the Treasury and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

Under the previous system, 40% of the value of agricultural property relief went to just 7% of claimants. That is not fair and it is not sustainable. Our reforms will put a stop to wealthy individuals buying up agricultural land to avoid inheritance tax and, in the process of doing that, pricing younger farmers out of buying land for themselves and for their families. As a *Farmers Weekly* correspondent pointed out,

"prices have been artificially inflated by non-agricultural buyers purchasing land for inheritance tax purposes",

thereby making it hard for young farmers to set up a family farm. That is correct.

The reforms will protect family farms by closing the loopholes, but they will also help to provide funding for the public services on which families in rural and farming communities rely just as much as anyone else. When Opposition Members say that they would go back to the unfair old system, they also need to tell us which part of the new NHS investment they would cut to pay for it. Like everyone else, farmers and rural communities need a better NHS, affordable housing, good local schools and reliable public transport.

The last Government's economic failure left Britain with a flatlining economy, broken public services and the worst decade for wage growth since the great depression of the 1930s. Poor public transport meant that people could not get to work, the GP or the hospital when they needed to. Home ownership was out of reach for too many in rural areas. Too few new homes were built, and even fewer that were genuinely affordable. Digital connectivity in rural areas lags behind connectivity in urban areas.

We have to kick-start the economy to build the public services that rural communities need, and to help with that we have secured the biggest budget for sustainable farming and nature in our country's history. It will help to change farming practices so that we can clean up our rivers, lakes and seas, which the last Government left in such a filthy, polluted state.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): The Secretary of State mentioned the new set-up for the funding of agriculture and fisheries across the UK. He may be aware of the concern expressed by the Farmers' Union of Wales, which fears that processing the extra funds through the Barnett formula—as opposed to the previous arrangement, which was a ringfenced addition for the devolved Governments—might bring about a severe reduction in agricultural funding in Wales. Will the Secretary of State please give some reassurance that that is not the case?

**Steve Reed:** As I have said, the consequentials will work in the way in which they always work. Devolved Administrations have some discretion as to how they will



spend the money that is made available to them, but of course I, along with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, am more than happy to engage with, for instance, the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to discuss those points.

The huge investment we have secured in the sustainable farming budget will also help us to move to a zero-waste economy, as we end the throwaway society and reuse materials rather than sending them to landfill.

**Simon Hoare:** Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Steve Reed:** No. The hon. Gentleman has already had his chance to ask a question.

The investment will help us to boost food production as we move to models of farming that are not only more environmentally sustainable but more financially sustainable, and it will help nature to recover—here, in what has become one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth, with nearly half our bird species and a quarter of our mammal species now at risk of extinction.

Our plans to upgrade our crumbling water infrastructure will help to bring in tens of billions of pounds of private investment, and will create tens of thousands of well-paid jobs in rural communities throughout the country. We will reform the planning system to build the affordable homes that our rural communities so desperately need, while also protecting our green spaces and precious natural environments. We are investing £2.4 billion over the next two years in the flood defences that the last Government left in such an unacceptable state of decay and disrepair.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way on the issue of flooding. Anyone would welcome more money, which is desperately needed, but will he comment on the flooding formula? Many inland communities flood, but the Environment Agency continues to say that there is nothing it can do, because the flooding formula says it is not worth doing anything. Frequent flooding of smaller communities matters, too. Is the Department looking at that?

**Steve Reed:** We are looking at that, and we will be able to make proposals in due course. I know that the hon. Lady will be interested in taking part in a conversation about them when we do.

I am talking about the changes we are making more widely for rural communities. We will open new specialist colleges and reform the apprenticeships levy to help agricultural businesses and farms to upskill their workforce, and we will recruit 8,500 more mental health professionals across the NHS, with a mental health hub in every community to tackle the scourge of mental ill health in our farming and rural communities.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome what the right hon. Gentleman is saying about mental health, but may I take him back to what he said about the Environment Agency? There is concern about the arbitration over whether Natural England or the Environment Agency has authority. South of Salisbury, in the Avon valley, there is a massive issue. The Environment Agency has done a great deal of work, but there is always a concern

that Natural England will come in and overrule it. The arbitration over who is sovereign in such circumstances is a massive issue across the country, and I would be grateful if he could turn his attention to it.

**Steve Reed:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I have appointed Dan Corry to lead a review of regulation across the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, precisely so that we can iron out such anomalies.

I am keen to ensure that we crack down on antisocial behaviour, fly-tipping and GPS theft through the first ever cross-Government rural crime strategy, and we will improve public transport by allowing authorities to take back control of their buses to meet the needs of their communities.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The Secretary of State mentions rural crime, and I do not underestimate the scale of the challenge. In the last Parliament, with Labour's support, my private Member's Bill got Royal Assent. It just needs a statutory instrument to be laid before the House to bring in the definition of "forensic marking", which the police say will be a big power for them in combating rural crime. Will he talk to the Home Secretary to ensure that my Act starts to help him to deliver his rural crime strategy?

**Steve Reed:** I will convey the hon. Gentleman's views to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Steve Reed:** If the right hon. Lady will forgive me, I will conclude my speech, because I have taken an awful lot of time and Members will want to have their say.

Rural communities are at the heart of this Government's No. 1 mission: to grow the economy. Everyone, regardless of where they grow up, should have the same opportunities to succeed in life. We have had to take tough decisions to fix the broken foundations of our economy, but they are part of a Budget that will restore economic stability and begin a decade of national renewal for everyone, everywhere. I welcome this opportunity to set out the facts and figures, and to show why this Budget offers a better future for our rural and farming communities, as we fix the foundations and rebuild Britain.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.33 pm

**Victoria Atkins** (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for holding this important debate, and for welcoming me to my new role. From the arable fields outside my front door to the cattle and horticulture that stretch from the fens, the wolds and the marshes to the coast, my constituency feeds the country. I am delighted and determined to bring some of my county's common sense and love of the countryside to this important portfolio. On Armistice Day, I pay tribute to the fallen, and particularly to the farmers who stayed behind to feed the nation in wars gone by.

This is a critical time for our rural way of life. After years of unforgiving weather, rising commodity prices and more crop and livestock diseases, our farmers now face a new threat: a city-dwelling, socialist Government

[Victoria Atkins]

who do not understand or care for the rural way of life. The evidence is there in Labour's first Budget, for which it had 14 years to prepare. *[Interruption.]* The Back Bencher who is waving his arms around may want to listen to this. In this Budget of broken promises, the Chancellor laid careful plans to break the farming sector, the wider rural economy and our food security. Farmers look after 70% of the UK's land. They are the keystone of our rural communities. When they struggle, our rural economy is weakened and our food security is put at risk.

Today, as the consequences of this Budget are becoming clearer, I will focus solely on the rural economy, but I make this promise to the Secretary of State: in the future, I will be pressing him and his Government on rural infrastructure, flooding, crime, healthcare, broadband and mobile signals, the solar and wind industries and other matters that affect our countryside, because the impact of this Budget and the choices Labour has made will be felt for years after his expensive wellies have worn out.

I am going to focus on three broken promises by Labour; I am going to make it simple for them. The first broken promise for farming families is the removal of the tax relief that has meant families can pass on their farms to the next generation: agricultural property relief and business property relief. These are not loopholes, as they were described by the city-dwelling Chancellor, but careful tax policy planning developed over many years to prevent family farms and businesses from being split up and sold off. Of course we support efforts to root out abuse of the tax system, but the way in which the Chancellor has designed this policy means that it is tenant farmers and farmers in the middle who will struggle, not the very wealthiest.

This morning, I asked farmers on social media to send me details of how the policy will affect them and their businesses, and it makes for anguished reading. Farmers are furious, anxious and even distressed about the changes. They feel that the Government are coming after them and their families' livelihoods, when all that they and their ancestors have done is work hard, follow the rules and feed us. I have been inundated with messages about tenant farmers, whom the Government seem to have forgotten. A Welsh landowner has contacted me to say that this change in policy will mean that he must tell six multigenerational farming families on his land that he will have to sell their farms to pay Labour's family farm tax. As he put it,

"they will lose their homes, businesses and their children's futures".

In winding up the debate, can the Minister please explain what those six tenant families are to do when their farms are sold?

An example of how the measure will affect landowning families is provided by a family who have worked their 500-acre farm for four generations. The farm is owned by the mother, who is in her 70s, and her two sons, who are in their late 40s and early 50s, their father having died a few years ago. They make an annual income of around £45,000. When the mother dies, the sons will face an inheritance tax bill of at least £870,000. There is no way in which they can pay that bill without selling

their farm. Could the Minister advise the House how that family are to pay Labour's tax bill without selling their farm?

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The right hon. Lady has obviously had lots of letters and emails. Has she had a single one from any farmer who thinks this is a good idea? I have not had any from my constituency of Boston and Skegness.

**The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner):** We have—plenty!

**Victoria Atkins:** You couldn't make it up, could you? This is what is so worrying. This is why, at the beginning, I talked about a Labour Government who do not understand and do not care, and it is exactly this attitude from the Government Front Bench that farmers and their families are seeing. In answer to the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), I say as a former Treasury Minister that if there is evidence of abuse, of course the Treasury and the Chancellor must go after that, but given the way the Government have designed this policy, it is going to go after the hard-working families that look after our farms in our great county.

**John Glen:** My right hon. Friend and I have been Treasury colleagues. Officials often put forward this reform in the run-up to fiscal events, and she, like me, has resisted them. Will she reflect on the fact that significant landowners will have sophisticated tax planning regimes in place, that a large number of very small hobby farmers will be excluded, and that those who will be hit are modest family farmers? Even when those family farmers need to raise a relatively modest amount over 10 years, the impact of securing that funding is beyond them, given the margins they get from farming. Will my right hon. Friend reflect on the fact that this is, without doubt, a Treasury hit-and-run? The Secretary of State flatters himself to think he has secured the overall budget, but he has left farmers in a far worse state. *[Interruption.]*

**Victoria Atkins:** My right hon. Friend makes an important point about our experience as Treasury Ministers. Labour Back Benchers are shouting "Give way!" because they do not like hearing the truth. They made this choice; we chose not to go down this route.

There are many ways in which we can support our family farmers, and I have had the pleasure of having a cup of tea with many of them around their kitchen table after they have shown me their farm. Labour Front Benchers lack such experience, because their constituencies are all situated in the city.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**Victoria Atkins:** I promise that I will give way in a moment.

As the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness and my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) have both said, the sense of betrayal is palpable. As a fifth-generation farmer put it to me this morning, "Would you want to work somewhere that you knew over your lifetime was going to be taken away bit by bit?"

Another has urged us to

“fight this vindictive, illogical and ideologically driven tax”.

Just before I began my speech, in response to the Secretary of State’s speech, I received this message from another farmer:

“So long as mum dies before March 2026, we’re okay”.

Yet the farming Minister and the Secretary of State seem to think that these worries are exaggerated. Indeed, the farming Minister got a ripe old reaction when he said words to that effect at today’s poultry conference.

When we warned in June that a Labour Government would do this, the Secretary of State said that such warnings were “desperate nonsense” and accused us of lying. This followed the assurances he gave in December that Labour would not change this policy. So that is a broken promise. He is doing the exact opposite of what he said. How can rural communities trust him in the future?

The Secretary of State has given some helpful advice to farmers, however. He has told them that they will have to

“learn to do more with less”.

Labour has not said the same to train drivers, resident doctors or their other union friends. Indeed, pensioners and family businesses will be the ones paying for these public sector pay rises.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** Will the right hon. Lady join me in asking the Secretary of State, who did not allow me to intervene, whether the confirmation that agricultural funding for Wales is to be Barnettised means that the allocation will drop from 9.4% to 5.6%? According to the Farmers Union of Wales, that is a drop of £146 million and more. This will also affect Scotland and Northern Ireland, so we need clarity on this issue for Welsh farmers.

**Victoria Atkins:** I completely agree with right hon. Lady. If the Secretary of State would like to intervene on me, he can answer her intervention. Answer came there none.

**Simon Hoare:** My right hon. Friend is a very clever former Treasury Minister and I am not, so perhaps she can help me to reconcile these two statements. In essence, and in true Harold Macmillan phraseology, the Secretary of State told us that farmers have never had it so good, yet his advice is that they will have to learn how to do more with less. I cannot make those two things add up. Can my right hon. Friend?

**Victoria Atkins:** No. What is more, the NFU, the Tenant Farmers Association and the Country Land and Business Association cannot make them add up either.

**Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**Victoria Atkins:** I will give way once more, and then I must make some progress.

**Mark Garnier:** The Secretary of State talked about the fact that the price of agricultural land is artificially high because of tax avoiders trying to avoid paying inheritance tax. The implication of the proposed measures would be that the price of agricultural land will fall.

That may sound attractive to people who are trying to come into the market, but has my right hon. Friend considered the number of farmers who have mortgages against their land? They could find themselves in negative equity as a result of the pushing down of the price of agricultural land.

**Victoria Atkins:** Very much so, and I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) and for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) for their accurate and insightful interventions. Not only do some farmers have mortgages, but we know tenant farmers worry that their farms will be sold off, so that the landowners can enter into what some call a “greenwashing” agreement with corporates, in order to plant trees and gain access to green funds. One should not make the mistake of assuming that this ill-thought-through policy will lead to cheaper land prices: the maths on that is almost as bad as the Chancellor’s cockeyed accounting with her economic inheritance.

Let me tackle the ideology of this policy, reiterated by the Secretary of State during this debate, which is matched by Labour’s incompetence. First, the Chancellor herself does not seem to know the threshold at which her policy kicks in and whether spouses can transfer their allowances. Indeed, the Secretary of State does not seem to know that either. The Chancellor has said that the allowances can be transferred, yet Treasury documents supporting her Budget say that they cannot. In his winding-up speech, will the Minister clarify whether the Treasury’s documents are wrong or the Chancellor is wrong?

Secondly, will the Minister explain why this Government have targeted only British-owned farms and businesses with this tax hike? Companies operating here but owned overseas, private equity-owned businesses and public companies listed on stock markets will not have to pay Labour’s tax; it is just British families.

Thirdly, the Chancellor—and, indeed, just now, the Secretary of State—gave assurances that only a quarter of farms will be affected, but that is not backed up by the data from the Secretary of State’s own Department. DEFRA figures show that, in fact, these changes will affect two thirds of farms—some 66%. Will the Minister explain that discrepancy and what he has done personally to confirm those figures, so that he ensures he gives only accurate information to the House?

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Another point we need to consider is the impact on food security if farmers decide to hand back their farms or have their farms broken up, as my right hon. Friend suggests. Does she have any thoughts or has she seen any evidence about the possible impact on food security? I have not seen any such evidence, which is a concern in itself.

**Victoria Atkins:** It most certainly is a concern, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. He represents a very rural constituency and knows only too well the concerns his constituents are facing. It is a good point, which I will develop later in my speech.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): On that point, will my right hon. Friend give way?



**Victoria Atkins:** I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), and then I will make some progress.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): My right hon. Friend is very kind, and she is making a masterly exposition of how to deconstruct this case. Did she notice, exactly a week ago, when we had an urgent question on the subject, the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs was asked how food security could be valued if the result of the Budget measures would be that farmland would be split up and sold off, probably for development. His answer said, in part:

“Of course there are trade-offs. There are a range of pressures on our land, in respect of housing, food, energy and so many other things.”—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2024; Vol. 756, c. 37.]

So he seemed to be accepting that land will be sold off and it will be built upon.

**Victoria Atkins:** Of course, the Government's permissions for solar and wind industrial units on prime agricultural land will only add to those pressures as well.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Victoria Atkins:** I will make some progress. The immediate impact of the changes, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) said in his intervention on the Secretary of State, is that farmers are already stopping capital investments in machinery, systems and buildings for fear that any improvements to their farms will send them over the cliff edge into this tax trap. So for a Government that claim to want to grow the economy, their choices are achieving the exact opposite. This family farm tax is a broken promise that will break family farms.

I move now to the second broken promise: the accelerated reduction in delinked payments. From next year, those vital payments will be substantially less than farms were promised. They cannot have foreseen that when they made their business plans. A tenant farmer has told me that he does not know how he is going to pay his rent next year, because the drop is worth more than £20,000. Can the Minister explain how this farmer should do more with less?

The third broken promise is the hike in national insurance for employers, of course. As the OBR has said, an increase in employer NICS will be passed “entirely” on to working people. I know that Labour does not actually know who it means by “working people” but the Conservatives are clear that it definitely includes farmers, their staff and the small businesses that support them, day in, day out.

**Louise Jones** (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): The shadow Secretary of State says that she opposes the changes. Will she commit to reversing them, and which public services would she cut—for example, which NHS services?

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Lady is new to her place. As Financial Secretary to the Treasury I used to collect taxes for the United Kingdom and as the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care I used to spend pretty much all of them, so I know that the £500 million that the Government have score-carded this increase as achieving

by the end of the score-card period will buy a fraction of what the NHS needs on a daily basis, let alone annually. If you believe the Whips' handouts, the difficulty is that they sometimes get you into trouble.

For that matter, the phrase “working people” also includes our rural publicans. Labour Members are very proud of their Chancellor taking a penny off a pint. Yet any rural publican will tell you that will not even touch the sides alongside the NICs tax hike. Sadly, Labour's jobs tax will see higher prices, fewer staff and more pub closures.

The jobs tax is also hurting our frontline services. GP surgeries, care homes, hospices, pharmacies and dental practices will all see their costs rise, and some will close. That hurts in a city centre, but it is devastating in communities who live with the impacts of rural sparsity, where it is more expensive to deliver services.

**Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I appreciate that the right hon. Lady has referenced the NHS. I get lots of letters, emails and messages from farmers who have been completely let down by the state of the NHS as it was left by her as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. Given that she has a new role, has she had any time to reflect on where she went wrong?

**Victoria Atkins:** I know the hon. Gentleman's part of the world very well and I am sure—I can sense that he will be a conscientious local MP, mindful of his small majority—that he will badger the Health Secretary and ask him why he has not delivered the Conservatives' dental recovery plan, which this autumn would have seen dental vans in rural and coastal areas, because as the Secretary of State I wanted to ensure that those areas had dentistry services, and golden hellos for new dentists setting up in rural and coastal areas. We were also introducing additional dental training places. We can all see the need in our rural areas, but the jobs tax and the family farm tax are not the answer.

This Government love raising taxes, so they are also raising taxes on fertiliser, on double-cab pickups and on business asset disposal relief, while risking food security by permitting solar and wind industrial plants to be built on prime agricultural land. The great shame is that none of this is necessary. This Chancellor's cockeyed accounting is not believed by farmers, the public or even the OBR.

In government, we provided the largest ever programme of grants to farmers and brought the farming budget to its highest ever level. We provided more than £5 billion for flood protection, and established a new national rural crime unit. But we also understood that farmers and rural communities need dynamic support, and that is why we committed to raising the farming budget by £1 billion over this Parliament—a move this Labour Government have failed to replicate. Their freeze in the farming budget with no guarantee of a forthcoming increase means they have chosen to offer farmers and rural communities a real-terms cut. That all adds up to a direct risk to food security, because if our farmers do not thrive, domestic food production suffers, and that means more imports and higher prices. This is the “don't bother” Budget from the “don't care” Government.

This is the Labour Government's choice and they should own it. They have turned their backs on rural communities and we will not forget. We will not forget

that this Government are happy to plough straight over anyone who is not a trade unionist. We will not forget the huge bills put by this Chancellor on to working people, pensioners, farmers, pub landlords, business owners, and students.

I repeat the pledge by the Leader of the Opposition—the Conservatives will reverse the cruel family farm tax. To all farmers, farming families and rural communities out there, I say that we Conservatives stand with you, we have your back and we will work night and day to hold this useless Labour Government to account.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nurat Ghani):** I call Josh Newbury to make his maiden speech.

5.56 pm

**Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to make my maiden speech as the Member of Parliament for Cannock Chase, my home. Having listened to many maiden speeches from all parts of the House, I have to say that I am honoured to be part of an incredibly talented intake—not that I am at all biased.

I also have the privilege of following some outstanding predecessors who are fondly remembered by my constituents. The best known is the late, great Jennie Lee, who represented the former Cannock constituency for 25 years and also served as Minister for the Arts, playing a key role in the foundation of the Open University. Jennie was recently cited by the Chancellor as one of her political heroes and a contender to replace Nigel Lawson's portrait in her office. Alongside her husband, the equally incomparable Aneurin Bevan, Jennie is commemorated across the constituency, including Jennie Lee Way in Rugeley and the Bevan Lee estate in Cannock.

I could not speak about past Members for Cannock Chase without paying tribute to my Labour predecessor, Dr Tony Wright, who served as MP for Cannock and Burntwood and later Cannock Chase from 1992 until 2010. Tony was the epitome of a dedicated constituency MP. Constituents regularly speak warmly of Tony and he won votes from across the political spectrum. If I can be half the MP Tony was, I will be able to look back on my time in this House with pride.

I would also like to pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Dame Amanda Milling, who served our constituency for nine years. Amanda is praised by both supporters and detractors alike for her efficient approach to casework, which I know would be the envy of many MPs' offices. Amanda served as a Government Whip for many years—not an easy job—and as Minister for Asia and the Middle East. I understand that Amanda also chaired the group of female Conservative MPs and was a passionate advocate of programmes that encourage women to stand for election. I may not have often agreed with Amanda politically, but I have always found her to be fair-minded, kind and decent, so I genuinely wish her all the best for the future.

When people hear the words “Cannock Chase”, they naturally think of the stunning forest that is the constituency's namesake. While making their first speeches, many new Members have claimed their constituency as the most beautiful in the land. However, I have to point out that my constituency is the only one in England that

shares its name with an area of outstanding natural beauty—facts are facts! But the Chase is not just a place with serene walks and herds of fallow deer, although we have plenty of both. It is also a place of industry, sport and recreation. The Chase is still a working forest, managed by Forestry England, which produces around 19,000 tonnes of sustainable timber every year.

The Chase is arguably most famous as a national destination for mountain bikers. As someone who could barely stay upright on fresh tarmac, the conversations I have had about mountain biking have probably been the steepest learning curve I have been on since the general election. But I look forward to working with bikers and Forestry England to build on the legacy of the 2022 Commonwealth games and make sure that unauthorised trails do not spoil the natural beauty of the forest.

The Chase is a vibrant place with a huge range of activities, including the high ropes and free falls of Go Ape at Birches valley. I place on record an open invitation to the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), who, four months on from the general election campaign, must be suffering from zipline withdrawal. The iron-age hill fort of Castle Ring and the Chase's former status as a royal hunting forest attest to its rich 12,000-year history. More recently, soldiers were trained on the Chase, including J.R.R. Tolkien, who was stationed there in 1916, and who may have drawn from it inspiration for the great forests in his legendary books.

However, as my constituents would be keen to remind us all, there is much more to Cannock Chase than our forest. Our tight-knit communities are home to organisations that we are immensely proud of. Charities such as Cherishers, Help a Squaddie, Catherine Care and Newlife are the best of Cannock Chase, bursting with dedicated staff and volunteers who selflessly give their time. The construction, retail and education sectors are the biggest employers locally—unsurprisingly, given that our three main towns of Cannock, Hednesford and Rugeley enjoy a strategic position on A roads and on a busy railway line. Cannock has the headquarters of Finning, the world's largest dealer of Caterpillar construction equipment, as well as the west midlands designer outlet village.

Nevertheless, my constituency is not just urban and industrial; it is also semi-rural, with around a third of our land being agricultural. Clustered around the villages of Slitting Mill, Prospect Village, Cannock Wood, Wimblebury, Norton Canes and Heath Hayes is a tapestry of farms. Many of these communities feel left behind—last in the queue for infrastructure and services that other areas take for granted. A lack of access to GPs and bus services is frequently raised by my constituents in rural areas. We are also home to many businesses in the food supply chain, from processors to distributors. Because of those constituency interests, as well as my passion for the sector, I am delighted to be getting stuck into my role on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Interspersed between houses, factories and nature reserves are small remnants of the once dominant coalmining industry, some of which are conscientiously preserved as much loved reminders of our proud mining heritage. While we do not want to see a return to coalmining, our towns and villages long for the secure jobs,

[Josh Newbury]

social fabric and sense of common identity that characterised coalfield communities for centuries. The sudden closure of Rugeley power station in 2016 signalled a final move away from coal. The now cleared site is soon to be renewed, with a new community of hundreds of homes, a school and a new park, which will alleviate flooding from the River Trent. Following the very welcome and long overdue return of the mineworkers' pension scheme investment reserve to hundreds of families in my constituency, I look forward to working with the Government and others to bring investment and renewal to communities across Cannock Chase.

Deciding what to say in a maiden speech leads us to reflect on what brought us to this extraordinary place, and what we hope to achieve for the people who sent us here. For me personally, it is momentous to be standing here, because 20 years ago I was a painfully shy young boy in the corner of the playground with my head buried in a book, trying as hard as I could to be invisible to the bullies who tormented me for a sexuality that, at that age, I did not yet understand. Today, I stand here proudly as a Member of this House. If I achieve just one thing in my new job, I hope it is to show young people who are in the position that I was in that your bullies do not define you, nor do they limit what you go on to achieve. I also hope to make my mark in other ways. Alongside my incredible husband, I am an adoptive parent to a beautiful four-year-old daughter, and foster carer to an equally beautiful nine-week-old baby boy, so adoption, permanence and our care leavers are all passions of mine.

Having been a councillor in my constituency for over five years, I am and will always be a fierce advocate for local councils and the tangible difference that they make to our communities. Given that my constituency has the highest proportion of people who commute by car in the whole of England, I know that a priority must be to fix the potholes. I am delighted that the Government are committed to both devolution and decent roads. As a proud member of the Co-operative party, I am always keen to promote democratic ownership. Communities in rural and coalfield areas know more than most the value of clubbing together and giving everyone a stake in the places and services that they rely on.

It is safe to say that I have lots on my to-do list, which is hardly groundbreaking for an MP, but I must finish by thanking the people who have enabled me to serve my home of Cannock Chase in this House. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a whole town to win an election campaign. I thank the Cannock Chase Labour party and all the volunteers who contributed to our record-breaking result. I thank my incredible family, many of whom are in the Gallery. They have helped me to overcome so much in my life, and they have put up with a lot; I am sure that many Members' families can relate to that. The final thanks go, of course, to the people of Cannock Chase for giving me the opportunity to fight for our towns and villages. I will go on as I have started, repaying that trust with action and hard work for as long as they keep me here.

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

6.4 pm

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is traditional to say nice things about somebody who has just given a maiden speech, but that was a genuinely outstanding maiden speech. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) on the grace that he showed to his predecessor, and his clear and obvious expertise on, and passion for, his constituency. I will pass on the offer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), who I am sure will jump at the chance to go on a zipwire anywhere, but especially in the hon. Member's patch. I am sure that my right hon. Friend's diary secretary will be delighted with the commitment that I have just made on his behalf.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase claimed to have the most beautiful constituency in the country. We will let that pass for the moment. I represent Westmorland and Lonsdale, which covers the Lake district and the Yorkshire dales—a vast area of the United Kingdom that is utterly beautiful. We are now the second largest constituency in England. I know that it pales into insignificance besides some of my highland colleagues', but all the same, is it a place that I am very proud to represent.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for leading this really important debate. I welcome the new shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), to her position. I was thrilled and excited by the awesome picture painted of life in rural communities before 4 July, but just to bring us all back down to earth, I will remind us of what life was really like. Over the last five years, livestock farmers in my constituency and elsewhere have seen a 41% drop in their income. Look at our rural communities, and the evaporation of the long-term private rented sector, replaced by Airbnbs—unregulated, unintervened on, and unprevented. Second home ownership is gobbling up our villages and killing off rural communities. It is no surprise that at the last general election, the Rural Services Network calculated that if rural England was a separate region, it would be the poorest in England.

The Secretary of State will seek to be less disastrous for rural communities than the Tories who went before him. That is not a very high bar to clear, but looking at the Budget, I am concerned that he may not find that as easy as he thought. Let me say a thing or two about the Budget, in particular APR, BPR and the changes to inheritance tax. Some 440 farmers in my constituency will be affected by the APR and inheritance tax change. It is important to remember that very large numbers of people live on significantly less than the minimum wage, yet have a property that, on paper, is worth enough for them to be clobbered by the change.

While 440 farmers will be directly affected, hundreds of tenants will be indirectly affected, because when a landlord has to rearrange their business, perhaps to try to avoid paying inheritance tax, it will be tenants who end up losing out, however the landlord restructures their estate. I was pleased to hear the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs confirm at the Hexham northern farming conference last week that the Government will bring in a tenant farming commissioner. I congratulate and thank them for doing that, but the position will not be up and running before the policy has been introduced. Tenants will be evicted from their land. In our communities, we will see lakeland clearances as a result.



The policy has been sold as one that attacks the wealthy. No—the wealthy will find ways around it, just as we are finding with business property relief. I cite the case of the owner of a family-run, very famous, wonderful holiday park in the central lakes in my constituency. He is a father in his 90s. The business is not worth millions in terms of cash flow or profits, but to pay the death duties, the family will have to sell out to another big corporate. Big corporates and big equity houses will buy up farming and non-agricultural family businesses. When it comes to farming, land will pass into non-agricultural use, and the house will be turned into yet another second home. That will be devastating for not just family farms but rural communities as a whole.

**Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD):** Family farms are a key part of the fabric of our countryside, as farmers in my rural constituency tell me every day. They have spent all weekend trying to get my attention just to tell me that. What really worries me about the changes to inheritance tax in the Budget is that they will directly and disproportionately affect small family farms. Does my hon. Friend agree that that will have a devastating effect on small farms, and on our food security?

**Tim Farron:** I think it will. Many farmers earn less than the minimum wage, and although they own property worth an awful lot of money, it is worth nothing to them, really, because it is their business. As a consequence of the changes, someone will own that farm, but it will no longer be a family; it will be some huge estate, or a private equity firm. The Government must listen on that issue.

I will turn my thoughts to funding elements in the Budget. I have found a very rare creature: a Brexit benefit. Leaving the common agricultural policy, and moving towards environmental land management schemes—set up by the previous Government, adopted by this one, and supported in principle by the Liberal Democrats—was an opportunity to make things better for farmers and our countryside. However, the previous Government botched things completely by failing to fund the projects properly, and by taking away basic payments at a regular and dependable rate, and not replacing them quickly enough with a new payment under the environmental schemes. That has massively reduced our ability to feed ourselves. The agricultural policy of the last Conservative Government, which has, so far, been adopted by the current Government, is absolutely insane, in that it disincentivises the production of food. That is ridiculous, and I hope that the new Government look actively at putting it right.

The effect of the £350 million underspend by the previous Government was not felt in the pockets of the big landlords, who were able to get into the schemes relatively easily; it was smaller family farms that suffered, yet the Budget speeds up the rate at which we are getting rid of the basic payment, which is deeply troubling. A reduction of at least 76% in the basic payment for those still in the system will be devastating for their businesses. People do not know what to do next; they may end up backing out of environmental schemes and farming intensively in order to pay the rent and keep a roof over their family's heads.

It is worth bearing in mind the impact that the measures will have on the mental health of farmers. Let us put ourselves in their position. A fifth or sixth-generation

tenant farmer or owner-occupier might see that they could lose the family farm because of the Conservatives botching the system and the Labour Government's cliff edge. Do not put people in that position. Give them time to move into new schemes, rather than kicking the legs of the old system from underneath them.

Let me say a word about trade deals before I talk about other important rural issues. The previous Government absolutely threw British farmers under the bus in the deals that they cut with New Zealand and Australia. We must of course be pragmatic about relationships with the incoming Administration in the United States, but in any deal with the US, I urge the Secretary of State not to do what the Conservatives did in their deals with Australia and New Zealand. Protect British farmers and protect our values, please.

**Simon Hoare:** The hon. Gentleman and I shared very similar concerns about the trade deals with Australia and New Zealand. We feared that imports would swamp the market, but fortunately that has not come to pass; it has all been swallowed up by an ever-voracious Chinese and south-east Asian market. New Zealand lamb producers have actually reduced the size of the flock per capita. What we worried about has not come to pass, and we should be grateful for that.

**Tim Farron:** Well, I think it has come to pass, to a degree, in the sense that we allow equal access to our markets to those producing animal products—meat and other food products—who have lower standards than British farmers. That is just not fair; it is not a level playing field. The American market is far bigger, and my great fear is that doing a similar deal with Donald Trump will do much more harm to British farmers. I hope that the Secretary of State will be mindful of that.

Let me move on to other issues that affect our rural communities. In a constituency such as mine, the average house price is 14 times the average household income. We have a 7,000 household-strong waiting list for social rented housing. I mentioned earlier the collapse of the long-term private rented sector into Airbnb, which has a huge consequent impact on lives. I can think of a particular couple—she was a teaching assistant; he was a chef—who were kicked out by the landlord, who wanted to go with Airbnb. As a result, they had to take their two kids out of school, give up their jobs and leave the area completely. There were hundreds and hundreds of such cases, and the previous Government did not intervene until it was far, far too late.

The impact of the housing crisis in rural communities across our country is not just deeply upsetting and devastating for families, but damaging to our workforce. Sixty-six per cent of lakes and dales hospitality and tourism businesses are operating below capacity because they cannot find enough staff. One in five care jobs in Cumbria is unfilled because of a lack of permanent workforce.

Another matter that the previous Government refused explicitly to tackle, and which I hope this Government will tackle, is the scourge of excessive second home ownership in Britain's rural communities. People own those bolthole homes but barely live in them. The excessive number of second homes in our communities means that we lose our schools, our bus services and the very heart of those communities. Will the Secretary of

[Tim Farron]

State consider doing what the Liberal Democrats have proposed for years by making second home ownership a separate category of planning use, so that planners have the opportunity to protect their communities?

On health, so many of the issues that we face in rural communities relate to distance from care and people's ability to get where they need to be in time. That also means that we have efficiency issues. A GP serving a huge acreage may not be very efficient with their relatively small list, but we desperately need them. Will the Government consider our proposal for a strategic small surgeries fund to keep vital GP surgeries open in rural communities?

We must also bear in mind that some of the longest and most unacceptable waiting times for cancer treatment are in rural communities. We very much welcome the £70 million for radiotherapy that was announced just before the Budget—much to Mr Speaker's chagrin—but will the Secretary of State bear in mind that 3.5 million people in the country, most of them in rural communities, live in radiotherapy deserts? Half of us will have cancer at some point in our lives, and half of those people should receive radiotherapy treatment, yet barely a quarter of them do. One reason for that is that communities such as mine are just too far from that treatment. Will the Government ensure that some of that money goes towards providing satellite units in Kendal and other parts of rural Britain.

On public transport, it is right to say that the Government have made a poor decision in increasing the bus fare cap. That will have a huge impact on low-wage workers, particularly in rural parts of the country. Frankly, a £3 cap—or even a £2 cap—is a fat lot of good if there is no bus to use it on. I encourage the Secretary of State to devolve to local authorities the power to run their own bus services, and not to enforce local government reorganisation in order to achieve it—just give them those powers now.

I am coming to the end of my remarks, I promise. On broadband, the new Government—and the previous Government—have made good progress on Project Gigabit, and we ought to be grateful for that, but they must be aware that there will always be places that the project will not reach, including four in my constituency: Warcop, Hilton, Murton and Ormside. Those places are in deferred scope and, currently, are likely to get no service whatsoever. Will the Government consider de-scoping those places so that they can access vouchers? That would allow B4RN, our wonderful local not-for-profit broadband company, to step in and do the job.

You will be delighted to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this is my final point. It is worth pointing out that under the Conservatives, 45% of water bill payers' money went into the pockets of shareholders in dividends, into bonuses or into debt financing. Meanwhile, half a million instances of sewage dumping in our lakes and rivers happened each year. We welcome some of the Government's proposals to clean that up, but without radical reform of the industry—which they are not proposing—that problem will not be solved in a long-term way.

In conclusion, our rural communities have been taken for granted and deeply damaged by a Conservative Government; our memories in rural Britain are very

long, and they will not be excused that failure. We also see a Labour Government whose early start is not promising for our rural communities. As such, we in the Liberal Democrats have made a deliberate choice to be the voice of rural communities. We will take up that mantle with humility and passion, because a Britain that cannot feed itself is a Britain that will fail.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Chris Kane to make his maiden speech.

6.20 pm

**Chris Kane** (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): It is a great honour to be called to make my first contribution in this place as the Member of Parliament for the new constituency of Stirling and Strathallan. My constituency is the geographic heart of Scotland, and what a beautiful part of the world I am lucky enough to represent! At just under 2,500 sq km, it is predominantly a rural constituency—from its farming villages, including Drymen, Buchlyvie, Callander and Killin, to its former coalmining villages of Bannockburn, Fallin, Plean and Cowie; from the bonnie banks of Loch Lomond to the mountains of the Trossachs and the valleys carved by the rivers Forth, Endrick, Teith and Allan. It has the city of Stirling, with its majestic castle defending a royal burgh that became a royal city in 2002, and the city of Dunblane, with its magnificent medieval cathedral.

Politically, I follow in the footsteps of a daunting list of constituency representation that includes one Prime Minister, the father of a Prime Minister, two Secretaries of State for Scotland, a Secretary of State for War, a Father of the House of Commons and a Leader of the House of Lords. In my lifetime, we have had Harry Ewing, the godfather of devolution; Michael Forsyth, who brought the Stone of Destiny back to Scotland; and Dame Anne McGuire, who as Minister for disabled people signed the first human rights charter of the 21st century on behalf of the United Kingdom at the United Nations. Steven Paterson and Stephen Kerr bring us to my predecessor, Alyn Smith. Alyn represented Stirling in the previous Parliament, but prior to that, he represented Scotland with distinction as a Member of the European Parliament. He cares deeply for Scotland and has public service at his heart. I wish him well for the future and thank him for his service.

The coalfields of central Scotland transformed the landscape of the southern end of my constituency over the past 150 years. My great-grandfather, William Kane, was a miner, and while working at the coalface in 1914, a large rock dislodged from the ceiling and crushed him. William died from his injuries. His son, my grandfather Frank, was 12 years old, and had to leave school to earn money—not to take the family out of poverty, but to keep them alive. Everything that troubles me about that story has been improved by the Labour party and the trade union movement, with their relentless focus on improving workplace conditions and workers' rights over the past 100 years.

"We feel that something should be done. We have the idea that one of the functions of the Government of this country is to see to it that there should be equality, equity, and fairplay between the parties, that the weak should be protected from any outrage by the strong...It is the business of the Government to see to it that there should be equity and fairplay between all conditions of people in the State."—[*Official Report*, 13 December 1922; Vol. 159, c. 3011.]

Those are not my words, but those of my grandfather Frank's uncle, Hugh Murnin, who was also a miner. They were spoken by Hugh in this place, in his maiden speech, after he became the MP for Stirling in 1922. Reading all of Mr Murnin's speech, I was struck by how much has changed from his description of work, and how much has stayed the same. There is still much to do to deliver dignity and fair play, which is why I am proud that this Government are raising the national living wage and, through the Employment Rights Bill, will update the UK's outdated employment laws and turn the page on an economy blighted by insecurity, poor productivity and low pay.

I should say that 12-year-old Frank, my grandfather, became a grocer's apprentice. He developed an entrepreneurial spark that took off when the BBC began broadcasting in Scotland in the 1920s. He opened Bannockburn's Radio Music Store to supply radio sets and constantly recharge the large lead-acid batteries on which they depended. That business prospered under my parents, Bill and Diane, and my brother Michael runs the business today—shop local when you can.

Along with coal, the rivers and lochs of my constituency bring with them nutrients that are vital for farming. The flat floodplain of the Forth is 16 miles long and 4 miles wide, and is filled with farms that today produce everything from beef to dairy and from sheep to pumpkins. For many years, the River Forth was Europe's premier oyster fishery. Over 30 million oysters were harvested each year in the early 19th century, but overfishing caused a collapse and the Forth oyster was declared extinct in 1957. Issues such as overfishing and sustainability are studied in great depth at the University of Stirling's international centre for aquaculture, the largest of its kind in the world. It is leading the way in research to tackle the global problems of food security, hunger and sustainability through the world's rivers and seas. It was also a researcher from the institute of aquaculture who discovered in 2014 that the Forth oyster was still alive, with two of them growing in the river.

When the railway arrived in my constituency in 1848, it brought with it an entrepreneurial spirit that saw Scotland's first oil refinery open in Riverside in Stirling. Until the Forth bridge opened in 1890, the bridges at Stirling carried most of Scotland's goods to and from the highlands. Scotland's first heavier-than-air flight took place in Stirling when the Barnwell brothers built and flew an aircraft in the shadow of Stirling castle. That entrepreneurial spirit lives on in the likes of Highland Spring, a fantastic family business in Blackford that neighbours Gleneagles, one of the world's premier hotels and golf courses. In Stirling, a £20 million investment has recently been announced to create a film and TV studio that will be the largest in Scotland. Stirling was the first gigabit internet city in the United Kingdom, and one of the first in the world to digitally map its city to create an augmented reality smartphone experience.

We are a growing base for life sciences, manufacturing and, of course, tourism. My constituency offers some of the best outdoor activities in the country, from salmon fishing to hillwalking, with lots of family-friendly activities along the way. If history and heritage are your thing, we have castles, monuments, battlegrounds and the only working church other than Westminster Abbey to have hosted a coronation. For those who like sport, Stirling was showcased to the world in 2023 with the

time trials of the Union Cycliste Internationale's cycling world championships. Scotland's national swimming academy is at Stirling University and has produced Olympic medallists including Duncan Scott and Robbie Renwick. The UK's national curling academy is also in Stirling, and I cannot mention sport without referencing Judy, Jamie and Andy Murray, whose success, resilience and mindset have forever linked tennis with the city of Dunblane.

Stirling and Strathallan is not in the heart of Scotland: it is the heart of Scotland. Much of the modern sense of Scottish cultural identity originated in my constituency, from the battles of Wallace and Bruce at Stirling bridge and Bannockburn over 700 years ago to the reinvention of tartan at the mills of William Wilson—also in Bannockburn—in the 1800s. A much more subtle sense of my constituency is found here in this place and in the UK identity, because it was a Stirling resident, a weel-kent local face called King James VI, who united the kingdoms of England and Scotland in 1603. I have walked about this place wondering which of our traditions have their origins in the traditions of the court of King James at Stirling castle.

Stirling is celebrating its 900th anniversary this year—900 years since King David granted a small settlement on the River Forth burgh status. Stirling and Strathallan has gone on to give much to Scotland, the United Kingdom and the world over the past 900 years, and there is much more to come. Stirling and Strathallan is proud of its past and ambitious for its future, and I am hugely honoured and privileged to represent my home here in this place.

6.29 pm

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the maiden speech of the new hon. Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane). I am sure he will make a significant contribution to this place, and as a fellow Scot I wish him well.

I am lucky to represent the Scottish Borders, the place I call home. We have wonderful towns in the borders, but it is one of the most rural constituencies in the whole United Kingdom. There is a strong sense of community spirit among local people, but there is also a deep and growing concern that the Governments in Edinburgh and London do not get what is important to our communities. There is a widening disconnect between people and politicians, and a growing feeling that the needs and concerns of rural areas are not important to Scotland's two Governments.

For 17 years, rural areas in Scotland have been overlooked, and even ignored, by the SNP Government, who do not understand what is important to our communities—an SNP Government who are distracted and focused on their own selfish and often divisive obsessions. They spend time on fringe issues, such as gender reform, that do not matter to the everyday lives of people in the borders. With a new Government in London, local people are now feeling the same way about Labour. Labour clearly does not value rural areas and does not care about farmers or listen to our communities. The Labour Government are bad news for the borders and for rural areas across Scotland and the United Kingdom.



[John Lamont]

Let us look at what the Labour Government are already doing to rural communities. In their first Budget they changed inheritance tax, and business and agricultural property relief, despite warnings of the impact on rural areas. Their family farm tax will rip apart rural businesses and prevent farmers from passing on the family farm to the next generation. It is cruel, bitter and divisive. It is also the opposite of what Labour said it would do—another broken promise from the Labour Government.

Let us listen to what Labour said before the election. The Secretary of State said in December 2023 that the Labour party had no plans to change inheritance tax, including agricultural property relief, so it is shameful that he now claims to be proud of Labour's family farm tax. He was not the only one to make that pledge. The Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar, repeatedly promised not to raise taxes on working people, but that is exactly what they have done.

I have news for Labour: farmers are working people. In fact, they are some of the hardest-working people of any industry. They get up before dawn and put in a hard shift every single day of the week, 365 days of the year. Labour should be ashamed of raising tax on farmers and preventing them from passing on the family farm. This shameful betrayal will not be forgotten by rural areas or in my borders constituency.

Let me share with the Labour party what local farmers are saying, because it is clearly not listening. I recently spoke to Colin and Jill McGregor of McGregor Farms near Coldstream, who said:

"The autumn Budget that Labour broadcast last week will affect every family farming business across the country. We have been digesting the details over the last couple of days and can see a substantial financial impact on our farming business. The Government seems to have no idea of the costs involved in agriculture. The tax that would have to be paid on death will cripple many family farms, with a huge proportion having to sell land to pay the tax and breaking up family businesses that have been working the land for many generations."

Labour does not seem to care about the damage it is doing to farming.

Farming is not just a job but a way of life. We cannot overlook the immense contribution that our farmers and food producers make towards the rural economy and protecting our natural environment. They supply supermarkets and local shops, provide for housing in our towns and villages, invest in infrastructure, create jobs, employ workers, and much more. It is crucial that the Government take the right steps and measures to protect the industry and ensure its longevity for many years to come.

Labour and the SNP must provide certainty and stability to our farmers. If they do not, farmers and landowners will no longer invest or provide those important services. We should not forget: no farmers means no food. Labour's family farm tax will not just break up family farms, but limit food production, damage our food security and drive up the cost of our weekly food shop in supermarkets. Labour must drop the tax and keep its word to farmers.

But that is not all: Labour must start listening to rural areas. As it stands, Labour's plans will do great damage to local transport plans. Labour has announced

plans to drop the dualling of the A1 road, which is a vital transport link for my constituency in the Scottish Borders and for cross-border connections between Scotland and the rest of the UK, and it has halted progress on the borders railway, which is crucial for commuters and anyone looking to get around in the borders. How is the borders economy supposed to grow, and how are businesses supposed to create jobs, when Labour is cutting investment in our communities?

I will always stand up for rural areas, especially those in the Scottish Borders. It would be nice if, just once, the Labour party did the same.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call David Taylor to make his maiden speech.

6.35 pm

**David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab):** It gives me enormous pride to be stood before you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to make my maiden speech as Hemel Hempstead's MP. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) and for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane). I know Stirling well through my involvement in the Make Poverty History campaign; it is a very beautiful place.

I am grateful to make my maiden speech in the presence of the Secretary of State, who was generous with his time in my constituency during the election. I am humble enough to accept, however, that the primary reason for his presence was usually the fact that his mother resides in Hemel Hempstead and is a member of the local party.

In this debate about rural affairs, I want to start by paying tribute to the beautiful countryside that surrounds our town, and to the villages that are part of the constituency following the changes to the boundaries at the last election. From St Lawrence church in Bovingdon, where I was this morning to mark Armistice Day, to Chipperfield cricket club and the Green Dragon pub in Flaunden, we are blessed with many picture postcard scenes—and my dog, Albert, is particularly fond of chasing squirrels on Chipperfield common.

Turning to Hemel itself, the old town is so picturesque that one local council official jokingly referred to it as Hemelwood, such is its popularity as a filming location for local TV and movies. We were once home to the site of a major Roman villa on the River Gade, which supposedly had the biggest Roman bath outside Bath itself.

When Hemel town council was amalgamated into a new district council, exactly 50 years ago this year, the then Labour leader of the council, Gordon Gaddes, who is still a stalwart in our community even though he is now in his 90s, chose an old Latin name for the council—Dacorum, which means "of the Dacians", referencing a period in Saxon times when Danish law applied due to the presence of the Vikings. We also have a long-standing connection to Henry VIII, who in 1539 granted the town its market charter. Because of him, the mighty Hemel Hempstead Town FC are nicknamed the Tudors.

Like many others, my family's connections to the area come from the creation of the new town after the second world war. This new town was one of Labour's finest achievements, providing families with decent housing, good-quality factory jobs, education and healthcare.

From Chaulden where my dad grew up to Highfield where my mum did, and Adeyfield where my nan lives now, council housing surrounded a square with amenities such as shops, a community centre, a place of worship, a GP surgery and schools. I therefore welcome our new Government's commitment to build genuinely affordable housing and new council homes, while also ensuring that the right infrastructure accompanies them. As we seek to build new towns around the UK, I would be happy to show Ministers the virtues of our ingenious, and often misunderstood, magic roundabout.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, Sir Mike Penning. It was not just our community that he served with loyalty, but this nation: Sir Mike was a distinguished Grenadier Guardsman in the British Army and subsequently served as a firefighter in Essex. In his maiden speech he said that when he left this House he wanted to be known as a good constituency MP. He certainly was, doggedly taking up his constituents' individual cases when they needed him.

I also pay tribute to our two previous Labour MPs: Tony McWalter, who was kind enough to take me under his wing when I was a member of the UK Youth Parliament, and Lord Corbett. Sadly, I never had the opportunity to meet Robin, but I know from my friendship with his widow, Lady Val, that he was a wonderful, warm and kind man who served his constituents with compassion.

That leads me to the points that I will prioritise as I serve the people of Hemel Hempstead. First, I will strive to improve local healthcare, including by pushing for a new community hospital. In line with this Government's commitment to neighbourhood-based care, and enjoying the support of the local NHS trust, the local council and my predecessor Sir Mike, I will push hard for the project to advance in the most ambitious way possible, as well as ensuring that access to GPs and dentists improves.

I will make sure that children in Hemel Hempstead, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities, get the best possible education. The SEND situation, not only in Hertfordshire but in Dacorum itself, is particularly bad; the issue came up repeatedly when I was talking to voters as a candidate, and it is at the top of my postbag now as an MP. At one of my most recent surgeries one parent, Natasha, told me that her son Alfie had been diagnosed with autism aged five, yet he has been repeatedly refused an education, health and care plan and has been waiting for a specialist appointment for almost two years. Sadly, her story is one that Members of this House will know all too well. I am glad the issue is an area of priority for our new Government, and I will continue to work on it on a cross-party basis as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on SEND.

I will also prioritise combating crime. Recent stats show that Hemel was the one of the worst towns in Hertfordshire for antisocial behaviour—indeed, it was the worst major town—while vehicle crime is at 105% of the national crime rate. I have seen that at first hand when I have had the opportunity to go out with local bobbies on the beat. I will work hard to make our community safer, whether by getting more police officers in our town or by working to reopen the front desk at Hemel police station.

I know that the cost of living crisis is hurting people locally. Food bank use has gone up 1,000% in the past 10 years in my constituency. I applaud the work that local charities such as DENS, Community Action Dacorum and Hemel Hempstead Community Fridge are doing to help. I am doing everything I can to stand alongside them, but I also pledge to push for better decisions to be made here in Westminster to ensure that food banks do not need to exist at all.

In concluding his maiden speech, Sir Mike paid tribute to the person who brought him into politics, the late Sir Teddy Taylor—no relation; it is a common name—and it is only fitting that I do the same. After taking part in the UK Youth Parliament, I thought long and hard about which great cause I wanted to focus my time and energy on. I got involved with the Make Poverty History campaign; I still have the wristband around my wrist. I attended a rally exactly 20 years ago outside the Labour conference, where I heard the then Chancellor Gordon Brown speak in thunderous terms of our duty to help those less fortunate than ourselves. A few years later, I had the enormous privilege of working for him, with my newly elected hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Kirsty McNeill). Many within these walls and beyond will recognise his—and her—unrelenting dedication and drive to improve the lives of others, which inspires me to this day.

Finally, I add my name to those who have paid tribute to Jo Cox in their maiden speech. With the Labour Campaign for International Development, and now as a member of the International Development Committee, I remain committed to taking forward her legacy, particularly on the responsibility to protect civilians, which is so urgent everywhere from Ukraine to Syria to Sudan.

As Gordon said on the eve of the poll back in July, we have a choice in the UK and around the world: to succumb to pessimism or to embrace hopefulness and remember that, in Jo's words,

"we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

I will do my utmost, as long as I have the honour of representing the people of Hemel Hempstead, to push for a more hopeful future in our community, our country and our world.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. Members will be conscious that lots of speakers wish to contribute this evening. After the next speaker there will be a six-minute limit, which may need to be reduced in due course.

6.44 pm

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): What a privilege and a pleasure it is to have been here this evening for three outstanding maiden speeches. It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor). As it happens, I learned to swim at Dacorum leisure centre, but I never knew what "Dacorum" meant until tonight, so I am grateful to him for that. It was great to hear about the developing film industry in Hemel Hempstead, which used to be famous for the old Kodak building. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase

[*Damian Hinds*]

(Josh Newbury) says that Cannock Chase is more than a forest; the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead has certainly demonstrated that Hemel Hempstead is much more than an extremely complicated roundabout. All three hon. Members will be great contributors to this House of Commons and assets to our democracy. It was a pleasure to hear from them.

Rural Britain is different. The rural economy is different, quality-of-life issues are different, the profile of crime is different—almost everything is different. In some ways it is better—we have somewhat better air quality, and we spend less time sitting in traffic—but there are also many challenges. The sheer distances involved affect so many things, from people's ability to access regular specialist healthcare treatment to their ability to get the right T-levels placement for their career. That, in turn, has an impact on health inequalities and social mobility. The costs of provision mean that many of our constituents are off mains drainage, and many more again are off the grid. That has implications for their costs and, indeed, for decarbonisation.

On connectivity, things have improved a great deal, but many Members of this House will have had, or heard about, the experience of having to go to the end of the lane to receive a text message verification code that has already expired by the time they get back. Thankfully, such things continue to improve, but there is still a big gap between our rural and urban areas.

This is a broad topic. We could debate any of the issues that I mentioned, but to avoid being repetitious of other Members, I will restrict myself to three disparate topics. The first relates to connectivity, not for broadband or mobile but for an older technology that often gets overlooked: the phone. Rural areas have a particular angle on the upcoming roll-out of the voice over internet protocol, which will replace the public switched telephone network. Another thing to add to the list of differences in rural areas is the weather, which means that electricity lines get knocked over more often. We still have power cuts in rural areas, with a frequency that people in cities might find hard to believe. Sometimes they last for a few hours, but we had one in East Hampshire in the past few years that lasted for more than three days.

The proposal to get rid of traditional telephones, which are a lifeline in such cases, and replace them with internet telephony that relies on a one-hour power back-up was never going to work in rural areas. I am pleased that there has now been a pause, and I am also pleased that some operators, including Vodafone, which I spoke to the other day, are looking into a much better power back-up. We need to see more on that, but in the meantime we need to ensure that consumers who are changing system are made aware of the position.

My second topic relates to housing and affordability. It is quite a niche topic nationally, but it is definitely not niche in my constituency, where we have an area that is partly in a national park and partly outside it. The housing targets are set for the whole district, but there are severe restrictions on what can happen inside the national park, so there is a great deal of pressure on development and therefore on services just outside it, in places such as Alton, Four Marks and the southern parishes of East Hampshire. It is also an issue inside the national park, because there is already an affordability

discrepancy between inside and outside. Over time, as there is disproportionate development outside, that discrepancy will grow. I hope the Minister will discuss this anomaly with his colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and that it can be fixed in the national planning policy framework rethink.

The situation is exacerbated by the massively higher housing targets now coming for rural areas, with the change in the formula meaning much higher targets for areas such as mine but with targets reducing for parts of London, where clearly there is a major, and in most measures a greater, housing affordability issue. I ask Ministers to look again at how the affordability ratio and the overall formula work and seek to ensure that the new housing that gets built, not just the existing stock, is truly accessible and affordable to local people, not just creating very large numbers of new five-bedroom executive homes which will be just as out of reach as those already there.

My final point, which I know all Members will make tonight, is about the importance of farming. Nobody here needs to be told about the importance of farming; it is not quite the same thing as rural affairs but there is such a heavy overlap, and we rely on farmers for so much—for land stewardship, biodiversity, and managing the attractiveness of the countryside for the visitor economy. When we get snowed in in Hampshire, we even rely on the farmers to clear the roads.

Most of all we must never forget that we rely on these men and women for our food. Land yield really matters; it matters to them as agricultural businesses, but it also matters to us. The one asset we cannot increase in size is the total amount of land that we have in the country. It is in our national interest to support the farming sector to be able to get the most production possible out of the land. I urge the Government, genuinely, to think again about how they support this sector with the farming budget, with having a formal target for food security, and of course with rethinking their terrible move on inheritance tax.

There have always been different types of farms—large and small, owner-occupied and tenanted—but family farms have always been at the heart of our agricultural sector. They are businesses, but in one sense they are unlike other businesses. Their biggest asset is not something they have bought and is not something they intend to sell, so in that sense they are more like custodians of an asset than owners.

**Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Damian Hinds:** I must ask the hon. Gentleman to forgive me, as I need to finish in less than one minute.

The agricultural property relief and business property relief changes will cut right into this asset. I have a constituency example, a 50-acre farm with an estimated farm value of £5.5 million, but the profit from it is only £19,000 per year. In the event of the demise of the parents, the liability could be £900,000, and there is no way with a return on total capital of 0.35% that they can do anything other than sell it. That matters not just to that family but to all of us. First, there is the concern that larger businesses will come along and buy up these family farms, and they are not necessarily buying them



to plant crops or rear livestock; they may use them for renewable energy projects or carbon credit use, and that will mean less food production. Secondly, being aware that a tax is coming upon death, the current generation farming the land will be disincentivised from investing in the farm, knowing the return effectively will be lower. For those two reasons, it does not just matter to those families; it matters to every single one of us in this Chamber and every single one of us in this country, and I ask the Minister to please think again.

6.53 pm

**Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Can Members imagine what it is like for someone to not be able to see, hearing water flooding into their home, not knowing where it is coming from, fearing how deep it might get, with no idea where the next escape route might be in the house? Can they imagine being a child who has previously become homeless due to flooding and lost their most treasured possessions, for whom just hearing a raindrop outside triggers their post-traumatic stress disorder and nightmares? Can they imagine being a farmer whose entire crop is lost to the impact of flooding? Can they imagine being a carer for a child on dialysis, knowing that when it rains they could soon be dealing with pumping out contaminated water from their own home while their child is having treatment?

For many, these situations are not unimaginable; it is their reality. That is not a surprise when flooding is the most recorded natural disaster on this planet. In 2023, 176 flood disasters were recorded across the world, a similar number to the year before, both of which are significantly higher than the average of 86 recorded in the 1990s.

One third of our planet is prone to flooding, and over five million people here in the UK live or work in flood-risk areas. Flooding is also a huge economic problem, as we have heard today. According to work by the Risky Cities project, Arup and other partners, the single biggest shock or stress that can affect the economy of 60% of the Rockefeller Foundation 100 resilient cities across the world is flooding. However, it is not just too much water; we are increasingly seeing the impact of too little water, or drought, and too dirty water, or pollution, impacting our rural and urban communities.

Water knows no boundaries, whether geographical, political or topographical. That is particularly challenging in countries such as ours where we have tried to make sense of the natural world and environment by creating frameworks and therefore putting boundaries in place. Water is complex. In many parts of the country, we could walk a kilometre alongside a watercourse and anywhere along that stretch someone might be impacted by flooding. The same water can pass along a river managed by the Environment Agency, into a culverted area managed by the local authority, through a farmer's field with riparian ownership, back to the EA, into an internal drainage board-maintained ditch, through a water company pumping station, back to a sustainable urban drainage pond managed by the local authority, and so on. In that short stretch between here and Westminster bridge, we could have several hand-offs and handovers of that ownership of an asset by half a dozen authorities.

To be frank, if we ask any of my residents who I visited recently in Westwoodside in Axholme, a rural area, or the River Idle Flood Action Group in Bawtry, they will tell us that they do not care who owns the water, they just want that water out of their homes, out of their gardens, and out of their business premises. In fact, they do not want it even to get to the stage where it comes in in the first place.

The same water management principle applies to cleanliness, whether water is impacted from diffuse sources like the run-off from land, combined sewer overflows, trade waste, septic tanks or misconnections. The ammonia, *E. coli*, enterococci, nitrates and metals that impact our ditches, dykes, rivers and oceans come from many sources owned by many individuals and organisations. We all have a massive part to play in cleaning up watercourses, and the fact remains that we need to manage water across the whole catchment; that requires system thinking and it requires our rural communities.

A catchment approach is imperative in managing water across the whole water cycle and in leadership, both role model and visionary. Role model leadership involves acting now. We have seen how this Government have focused and taken swift action through the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which will start to tackle part of the challenge, setting up the flood taskforce, providing £60 million in the Budget for flood-related work with the agricultural community, and the biggest agricultural budget in history for sustainable farming.

Visionary leadership involves looking at long-term planning for resilience to flooding through adaptation and mitigation. It is the kind of vision that considers innovation through sustainable urban drainage and nature-based solutions, working with the land to create flood adaptation while improving soil effectiveness, reducing carbon and finding new commercial opportunities. I have seen examples that deliver a combination of these things, like farmers in Yorkshire planting pop-up rainforests. That visionary leadership should also consider education, new skills, behaviour change towards partnering and close working across all agencies. It is because of all the above that I welcome the Government's action regarding the independent water commission, which will be the largest review of the sector since privatisation.

Nobody knows the land better than those who manage it, so I urge the Minister to continue to work closely with our landowners. Nobody is more passionate about the environment than our younger generations, so I urge the Minister to continue to work well with our Education Department around Skills England and the new opportunities for our rural areas. Nobody has more passion locally than our communities, who want to see improvements on their doorsteps. So may I finally urge our Minister to consider how to best work and co-create with our community groups—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

6.59 pm

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I congratulate all those who delivered their maiden speech tonight, and I look forward to hearing more from them in the years to come.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

I welcome this debate, which is exceptionally timely and important, and the fact that it is in Government time. I say gently to those on the Treasury Bench that if this is the start of a process of engagement with rural communities, that is welcome, but there has to be a process; this debate alone will not be enough.

The truth is that in the countryside, there is a genuine crisis of confidence in communities' futures, and in the future of farming. That is felt deeply in my constituency. I spent time on Saturday afternoon talking to four farmers in Orkney. Those young men had made a genuine commitment to the industry and are now at a loss. I really did not know what I could say to give them comfort or optimism. The language they used was interesting. One of them continually described the changes as "cruel". It is worth reflecting on why he did that. It was not hyperbole. Here was somebody who had given his family and his community a commitment that he would farm for the rest of his days, and suddenly it felt as though he had been cut off at the knees.

The Minister will doubtless tell us the number of estates that will, or will not be, affected. Those figures will need rather more robust scrutiny than they have had thus far. However, it is not all about figures; it is also about the psychology and the commitment. These people are hurting, and if there is to be any chance of the Government turning things around, there will have to be a rather more substantial and prolonged programme of engagement. Farming is at the heart of the countryside community. This is not just about the money that goes to farmers; that money then goes to seed merchants, feed merchants, hauliers, marts, vets, contractors, and the one-man businesses that go around farms paring feet, scanning for pregnancy and the rest of it. It is right that the most significant feature of the Budget for the community was inheritance tax, but there was an awful lot more in it that caused me concern.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman mentions the consequences for the broader community and businesses of extra taxes on the agricultural sector. Those are felt in my constituency of Basildon and Billericay, where we have the big New Holland tractor factory. This weekend, constituents were already coming to me worried about how the changes will impact their jobs. It is not just rural Britain that is affected. Does he acknowledge that there is a knock-on effect across the entire economy?

**Mr Carmichael:** I fear that there absolutely is that impact. That is why I gently caution those who frame the issue as a debate between urban and rural communities to think a bit more carefully. There is a strong case to be made for explaining to people in towns why people in the countryside matter to them, their future and the economy, rather than setting this up as a contest between the two.

Beyond inheritance tax, other issues in the Budget caused me concern, including the return of changes to the treatment of double cab pick-ups, and the effect of the carbon border adjustment mechanism on fertilisers. We all know what happened to food prices the last time we saw a spike in fertiliser prices. That was not caused by the imposition of a tax, but it does not matter what causes it; the effect will still be felt by families. There are

also the measures on furnished holiday lets. Farmers have for decades been encouraged by successive Governments to diversify their business. Many have gone into furnished holiday lets for extra income, but they now find that they are being clobbered again. They are having the rug pulled out from underneath them.

The inheritance tax changes have generated the greatest concern. I hear talk of scaremongering, but there has to be better respect than that for those concerned about the changes. I suspect that a lot of the figures that we hear have been affected by inter-vivos transfers between the generations. That is the most obvious way that inheritance tax can be dealt with by an estate or a family, but it leaves families open to difficult conversations and to the law of unintended consequences. Nobody knows what is around the corner, especially in farming, which, as we know, is one of the most dangerous occupations out there.

I have sympathy with the Government wanting to close fairly well reported and documented loopholes, but to do that at the expense of family farms is unjustifiable. The root of the problem, and the issue on which the Minister needs to engage with the Treasury, is that the threshold has been set far too low. When the Budget changes were announced, I went to estate agency websites in Orkney and Shetland, and I found two farms currently on sale in Orkney, both on one of the outer isles—further away, where we would expect land prices to be slightly lower—and both were being sold by the same family. One was for £2 million and the other was for £2.2 million. If those are the prices on an outer isle of Orkney, I can only assume that one would add a significant margin in Aberdeenshire, and a larger margin in Fife and the Borders. By the time we get to the home counties, goodness only knows what the price would be.

The concerns of agricultural and rural communities are genuine and well founded, and they need to be addressed. There is a serious debate to be had here, and I very much hope to be part of it. The Minister is well intentioned and diligent, but he needs to listen more to the people affected by his decisions—and, I am afraid, to listen less to the Treasury.

7.7 pm

**Julia Buckley** (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for setting out, earlier today, the support that our Government have put in place for rural areas, and particularly longer-term planned policies that will bring much-needed sustainability to rural communities such as mine in Shrewsbury. There are more than 350 farms in the beautiful villages to the west and south of Shrewsbury town, where there are stunning views over the Shrewsbury hills; it is an area of outstanding natural beauty and a well-known hiking spot. Locally, as nationally, farmers and the wider rural community have been concerned for several years, because despite all the noise from Opposition Members, the previous Conservative Government left our farmers to struggle. In fact, they presided over a deterioration in the profitability of British farming that decimated most of our smallest farms. They have been squeezed out of business due to ever higher overheads, low supermarket prices and creeping land values.

Where was the support from the previous Conservative Government? Where was the post-Brexit funding? Where was the post-Brexit trading deal that was to have protected

animal exports? Where was the support with customs red tape? Instead, there were the SFI and ELM schemes, which were rushed, complicated and too short-termist to be of any real use. It is no surprise that there has been an underspend of £227 million on those schemes in the past two years, as farmers could not respond quickly enough to the complex schemes, and the schemes did not match their need for longer-term planning. That underspend is criminal when we consider that one in 10 dairy farmers has gone under in the past two years.

All across the industry, farmers are telling us the same thing: British farming is no longer profitable. This weekend, like many Members, I was out visiting my local farms in Arscott and Yockleton, just outside Shrewsbury. I met fourth and fifth-generation farmers. Yes, they did have questions for me about the threshold for agricultural land, and I was able to sit with them and explain that the threshold for couples is £3 million. More importantly still, for true family farms—those that we wish to protect—where at least two generations are working side by side in partnership, they can share not just the workload but their assets by planning their financial future. That is manageable. What is not manageable is those farmers' overriding concern about the ever-declining profits in food production in our country. That is their No. 1 concern, and ours.

On every farm that I visit—I am sure that it is the same at every farm that hon. Members visit, whether arable or livestock—what comes up is the way that low product values, coupled with higher overheads, threaten not just farmers but all the supply chains that hold together the fabric of our rural communities, to whom we owe so much. I was therefore pleased to be able to remind farmers in my area that our Budget announcement—not much press coverage was given to it—delivered the greatest agricultural investment in our country's history: £5 billion over two years. By the way, the fact that the commitment is over two years is welcomed by our farmers, who can finally plan, with security and stability, more than one season ahead. Given the awful conditions that they have endured over the last few years, that immediate injection of funding and certainty is very welcome. Let us not forget that it was the main ask of the National Farmers Union in the weeks and months leading up to our Budget; we have delivered on its No. 1 request.

However, what most pleased farmers—they were surprised to hear it—was our long-term plan in the new deal for farmers, through which we will protect farmers from being undercut, through trade deals, by those low welfare standards. We will also sign the all-important new veterinary agreement with the EU to cut red tape at our borders and get British food exports moving again.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Julia Buckley:** I am sorry, but I need to rush.

Labour's flagship policy, of which we are all so truly proud, is that we will underpin British farming with long-term sustainable contracts, by directing public procurement towards British suppliers. We will use the Government's purchasing power to back British produce; 50% of food bought in every hospital, army base and prison will be locally sourced or certified to high economic standards. These are catering contracts that the Government

are already funding. Now, thanks to our Labour Government, all that investment will benefit our local farmers directly, and for the long term. Every farmer I have spoken to is delighted to hear that we have understood that the problem is the long-term profitability of farming, and that the Government are prepared to put their money where their mouth is to protect British farmers.

7.12 pm

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. I congratulate all hon. Members who have made their maiden speech today; they have all been genuinely fascinating and worth listening to.

I want to touch on the flooding issues that really cause concern in rural areas. Even in towns such as Tadcaster, which has the River Wharfe running through it, flooding is caused not just by water from the river, but by run-off in the town. The town depends on serviceable drainage, which can often get blocked, and drainage flaps. We are trying to get flood defences built, and are moving forward with money put in place by the last Conservative Government. Tadcaster's flood alleviation scheme is crucial to the economic regeneration of the town, because people in such towns cannot have faith in the local economy if they are flooded all the time.

I say with this with great disappointment. I have had several meetings on these issues with the Environment Agency, Yorkshire Water and Councillor Kirsty Poskitt—she is an independent councillor, but we are working well together—and Yorkshire Water promised us that the flap valve in Tadcaster that drains the water from the high street would be serviced once a month. That was a lie, and it has now said that it will do so every six months. That is not good enough. We are trying to do what we can for our communities, but we see the people in charge—the people whose responsibility this is—lie to our faces. We will have further meetings about that, because communities need certainty, and so do businesses.

There are also issues when housing developments are built in places with existing flood concerns. When we really get out into the countryside, communities can be cut off completely. They are struggling to cope with the watercourses as they are now, and we know that the weather and climate are changing—there is more water.

I have had several meetings in one village, Bishop Monkton, since I became the Member of Parliament. I have spoken to local people, the parish council, local councillor Nick Brown and the flood groups. Again, promises were made, but we are not getting anywhere. Bishop Monkton has been let down by Yorkshire Water and the EA for too long. There is a new planning application for 60 new homes, and they say that the water system can cope with it. It cannot—that is blatantly obvious.

When these big developments go in, Yorkshire Water and the Environment Agency should make them do water alleviation work through soakaways and slowing the flow, rather than just saying, "Well, according to our models, it can cope." Sewage flows down the street in that small, picturesque, beautiful Yorkshire village in my constituency, yet it is claimed that there is nothing wrong.

The hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), who is a sound man, being a West Ham fan, said that nobody knows land better



[Sir Alec Shelbrooke]

than those who manage it. He is absolutely right. That is why we should be concerned about this inheritance tax raid on farming, which will get rid of tenant farmers—those who have worked the land for generations and understand best the watercourses and what happens there. In the villages where I talk to people, who knows better than anybody else the hydrology of the land? It is the farmers and the people who live there. If all that goes to corporates who have no contact with the local communities, we will lose the knowledge and memory of the people who have worked that land for centuries.

**Sir Gavin Williamson:** I am not sure whether my right hon. Friend will have found this in his constituency, but in Staffordshire many farmers feel utterly betrayed. They listened when the Labour party said it would not punish them through inheritance tax changes, yet that is what it is doing. There is a real sense of being let down and betrayed by the Labour party.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke:** I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend. We know what our rural communities are like, and I am sure we all enjoy a pint, but when I go to the pub at the moment I hear farmers in despair saying, “We were told this wouldn’t happen.” As much as the small family farms, it is the tenant farms who are under real threat.

For all the statistics that are pumped out by the Treasury saying this and that, it very much sounded from the Secretary of State’s opening remarks that there is a small cabal at the top of No. 10 making all the decisions and that everybody else has to go out and sell them. We have all read that book, and we know where it comes from. I have to say to the Labour party that “Animal Farm” is not an agricultural playbook. That is what is going on: it is, “We will tell you how to run your farms. We will tell you where to get the money from. If you can’t do it, it is your failure. The state knows best how to run it.” Everything we have heard from Labour Front-Bench Members dismisses everything that has come from the NFU and thousands of farmers around the country.

I find it hard to believe that anybody has had nothing but positive letters and positive emails in their inbox saying, “Oh, it’s fine. We’re very happy about it. Everything you’re doing is great for the community. It’s all right. We believe you. It was written in big white letters on the barn door that everything will be fine.” That will probably change later on and Labour will say, “No, that’s what it always said.” We have read that book, and the Labour party needs to start listening to the people who till and farm our land.

It is not good enough to say, “You will be protected,” because they know that they will not be. That brings me back to the beginning. If we lose the people who understand the countryside and the hydrology, when in towns such as Tadcaster and rural villages such as Bishop Monkton and many more around my constituency we see housing going up on the land that has to be sold off to pay the inheritance tax bill, the flooding will become greater and greater. Ultimately, that will lead to a far higher cost to the country than the small amount of punitive tax that Labour claims will save the NHS.

7.19 pm

**Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): I would like to address four issues in the short time that I have. The first is water security. We have heard a lot about flooding today, but as my hon. Friend the Minister will know, in Norfolk we have the opposite issue—water shortages are more of an issue for us. I will also speak about controlled environment agriculture—a new development phase that we can turbocharge in this country—as well as the horticultural sector, which is vital for us, and the Animal and Plant Health Agency.

In Norfolk, as in the Minister’s constituency in Cambridgeshire, we need to look at water security in a lot more detail. When speaking with farmers last Thursday, one of the issues that came up was the building of reservoirs on agricultural land. Unfortunately, the Environment Agency and other planning authorities are proving to be more of a barrier than a supporter of this construction, which means that our farmers have to tap into more drinking water, which is more expensive and drives up prices for them. The floods Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), who is not in her place, has been working closely with me, and I look forward to working with her to push forward new policies that ensure that reservoirs can be built on agricultural land to develop water security.

It is important to talk about new innovations in agriculture. All too often, we think of the more traditional methods—the herbicide era and the pesticide era—but we are going into a new era of vertical farming and controlled environment agriculture. I believe that these are vital not only because we can get higher yields from less land, but because they are better for the environment and help us meet our climate change targets. However, there is an issue in the current legislation on biodiversity net gain, and I would appreciate it if the ministerial team would consider it. Because these are closed structures, in their essence they are not net gain providers of biodiversity.

At the same time, these structures decrease land use because they can increase production on a smaller site. They also use fewer damaging pollutants that leach into the area because they are, by their nature, closed systems. They reduce carbon emissions because they are able to precisely grow and engineer the plants that we need. To follow a bit of a theme, they have a smaller water footprint—going back to my first issue of what is important for Norfolk, we need proper use management of our water system. It would be great if my hon. Friend the Minister would look into BNG requirements on controlled environment agriculture to make sure that we can grow this industry, tackle our climate emission targets and be at the forefront of this sector around the world.

Next up, horticulture is important for my constituency of South Norfolk. I have Viking Nurseries, which I will visit in couple of weeks’ time. Hon. Members’ teams may have noticed that I sponsored the Horticultural Trades Association in Parliament, which gave out 153 house plants. I hope that we brightened up the Houses of Parliament and all offices across the estate. It was a fantastic event, and it was important to raise awareness that horticulture should not be overshadowed by agriculture. Both are aspects of our economy.

The House of Lords report on horticulture recently showed that the sector supports 674,000 jobs and contributes about £28 billion to UK GDP and about £6 billion in taxation. It is not something to be sniffed at. We also need to bear in mind that our country was the forerunner in horticulture, and we have lost that crown over the years to the Dutch. There is no reason why we should not regain that crown, and we should be pushing for that as a new Government.

The other issue that I would like to concentrate on is biosecurity and the APHA. As was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, bluetongue was sadly first found in Haddiscoe in my constituency. The outbreak spread across the eastern coast, and we are living with the consequences. There are extremely sad situations when people take animals to market and lower prices are being charged for no reason, even though they are being moved within the market control area. That is an issue that we see with our biosecurity. This week we have also seen the first measured case of the new variant of avian influenza coming to our shores, which should worry us greatly.

From speaking to the APHA, it concerns me that it is fighting on so many fronts. Sugar beet has a longer growing season, so there are aphids for longer because they are not killed off by the frost, and we therefore have more yellow leaf. We have bluetongue and avian influenza and over the seas we have African swine fever as well. These are great risks to UK biosecurity. I greatly welcome what was announced in the Budget—more than £200 million for investment into biosecurity—but we must work closely with the Home Office to make sure that our border security officers are fully trained in this area to recognise the issues coming to our shores and protect our farmers, agriculture and horticulture, which provide so much to South Norfolk and to the United Kingdom.

7.25 pm

**Patrick Spencer** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): This debate has been about APR, but I will talk about flood risk. Suffolk is, by its nature, a county at high risk of flooding. Large parts of my constituency are covered by rivers: we have the Rivers Deben, Orwell and Alde. We have tributaries that filter across low-lying land and clay soil, which apparently is not particularly permeable—I learned that during the general election campaign. That means that whenever there is heavy rainfall, streams and rivers become overburdened very quickly, creating bogs, waterlogged fields and eventually flooding across our fields. The water has nowhere to go. Roads are overwhelmed, as are irrigation and sewerage systems, and whole villages can find themselves under a foot or two of water after one night.

One year ago, Storm Babet did exactly that. We experienced an incredibly wet October. One month's rainfall fell between 11 and 13 October, then 80 mm in the 24-hour period of 18 October. People were stranded in villages and cars were stuck on driveways. People living in Wickham Market, Needham Market, Framdsen and Charsfield were forced out of their homes. Some are not yet back in. People were traumatised, exhausted and facing financial oblivion after insurance companies used small print to stop paying out on the damage caused by the flooding.

We do not want to see that again, but the reality is that our climate is getting more volatile and the risk of flooding is as high as ever. We must take preparedness seriously, which is why Suffolk county council, the Environment Agency and community groups have undertaken to clear rivers, improve water flow through pipes and guttering, dig trenches and develop overflow areas in case of higher than average rainfall. I am more critical than many people of Suffolk county council and the Environment Agency for dragging their feet at times. I am working with residents of Earl Soham who are trying to get the highways agency to clear pipes and drainage. Suffolk county council is just not reacting quickly enough to that.

I recognise that the funding is not there when it should be. The funding from the centre is not adequate, and responsibility over who should take control of the situation is confusing, which is why I support the private Member's Bill by my hon. Friend Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) to sort this out.

I want to talk about something else that I believe is a real reason that flood risk has increased, and to remind the House that we have the option of reducing it in future. One of the reasons that flooding has worsened in recent years is the development of vast numbers of housing units in areas of high flood risk. Each development not only puts more homeowners at risk of flooding, but compounds that by increasing the risk of surface water run-off.

I know deep down that the decision to reform APR and increase the inheritance tax liability for small farms is fundamentally about releasing land in rural areas so that developers can build more houses on it. There is no justification whatsoever for it from an economic point of view. There is no way the Government will raise enough money to support public services, as various Members have said today. The only viable reason that I can understand for the Government introducing APR on small farm holdings is because they want to release land for development. If we continue to concrete over fertile farmland, of any soil type, we will increase that risk.

**Sam Rushworth:** *The Daily Telegraph*, which I know is the paper of choice for more respectable Conservative Members, reported last year that wealthy investors are “hoovering up” agricultural land to avoid inheritance tax, a situation that it said meant more land was falling into the hands of private and institutional investors.

**Patrick Spencer:** Let me take a moment—Members throughout the House have an opportunity to watch—to address that exact case. The Labour party wants to tackle big landowners like James Dyson and the Grosvenor Group; I have two points. First, take for a moment the incredible work done by Dyson Farming on food technology, which is increasing the productivity of our land and the standard of food production on his farms. Think of what the Grosvenor Group has done in the moorlands and peatlands of the north-west—it is a protector of our environment and has supported our natural environment and increased the ecosystem.

Secondly, do the Government think for a moment that either of those two people are going to go to bed worried about the IHT change? No, they are not. They will dodge it, much like many of the well-heeled business people always do with taxes. The people who will bear

[Patrick Spencer]

the brunt of the Labour party's tax policies are small farms—family farms—that do not have a huge amount of capital. When we try to tax and demand liquidity from an illiquid source, we force people to fire sale their capital. It will not work. We have to understand the economics.

The risks are real. In Needham Market, Hopkins Homes built the St George estate at the base of a hill in an old disused quarry close to sea level, and right next to an area considered at high risk of flooding.

**Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Patrick Spencer:** I will not, because I do not have long.

In Framlingham, developments either side of Station road have increased the risk of surface flow in an area that is, again, at high risk of flooding. All these places were hugely impacted by Storm Babet, and I believe the impact was made exponentially worse by huge housing developments cluttering our countryside. Between 2001 and 2021, Framlingham's population increased by 1,200, which is nearly 50%. The population in Debenham increased by 16%. Great Blakenham has more than doubled in size. If we continue to use the Suffolk countryside to solve our housing crisis, the consequences will be disastrous.

7.33 pm

**Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I am delighted to have the chance to speak in this important debate about rural affairs. I will focus my remarks on farming. West Cumbria is home to hundreds of farmers, primarily cattle and upland sheep farmers. Sheep are ubiquitous in Cumbria: for every Cumbrian, there are five sheep. Farmers are rightly very proud of our Herdies, Rough Fells and Swaledales, as evidence by the closely fought competitions at many local agricultural shows. I have kept the peace by managing to avoid taking part in any judging to date.

I want to make three straightforward points, the first of which is about the relationship between farming and nature recovery. I want us, as a Government, to back farmers—especially those in iconic landscapes like the western lakes—who are leading nature recovery not as an alternative to food security but as a prerequisite for it. Across 40 square miles of the upper Wasdale and Ennerdale fells and commons, farmers have banded together to form the West Lakeland community interest company. Will and Louise Rawlings, Richard Maxwell, Julius and Kirsten Manduell, Kevin and Yvonne Holliday and their daughter Vicky, Sue Lister and many others are working together in innovative ways to ensure the long-term stability of traditional, nature-friendly farming and land management.

My constituency is also home to the Wild Ennerdale partnership, one of the UK's largest rewilding projects. The vision is to protect this remote valley, in partnership with farmers. It is a breathtaking place to visit, so please do not share that secret beyond these four walls. People such as Rachel Oakley, Gareth Browning, Richard and his Galloways, and all the volunteers and partner staff

from the National Trust, Forestry England, United Utilities and Natural England have made it a reality. I want the Government to do more to empower such models of nature recovery in partnership with farmers.

The second point is about the phasing out of the basic payments system. Despite the incredibly difficult financial backdrop, I welcome the Government's £5 billion commitment to support farmers over the next two years, including the largest amount ever for sustainable food production and nature protection. That contrasts sharply with the chaotic changes to payments and the growth of a highly bureaucratic system under the previous Government. I have heard the concerns from farmers about the phasing out of the delinked basic payment scheme. I want the Government to ensure that the future sustainable farming incentive and countryside stewardship rates mitigate the impact on farmers who had planned for delinked payments up to the end of 2028.

The third point is about the inheritance tax changes. Many farmers have expressed to me their anger about wealthy individuals buying up agricultural land to avoid paying inheritance tax, and how that is forcing up land prices so that young farmers can no longer afford it. The Government's changes seek to address that and are likely to affect only a very small number of estates in my constituency. I know that Ministers actively engage with farmers, and Government Members are very proud that Labour now represents many of the UK's rural communities. [Interruption.] I almost intervened on the shadow Secretary of State, who wanted to trade sizes of majorities. I held back from making a further intervention at that point, so I will ignore the hectoring. I ask Ministers to consider some form of transitional support for those who will pass down their farms in the coming seven years, and who may now be caught out by changes announced in the Budget.

Finally, I invite the Minister to come to west Cumbria and meet some of our brilliant farmers, as the Secretary of State has already done, to see at first hand the really important work they are doing and the important place they have in the fabric of our community.

7.37 pm

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Members who made their maiden speeches earlier. I thought they were all excellent, although I obviously take issue with anyone who does not think that North Shropshire is the best place to be an MP. North Shropshire is very rural and is inhabited by some of the best people you will ever meet. I like to spend my Saturdays and Friday afternoons knocking on their doors and asking them what they think. What they think is that they were taken for granted by the previous Government for many, many years, but I fear they are concerned the new Government are about to repeat that trick. I strongly urge them not to.

Farming is the backbone of the economy in places like North Shropshire. Whether farming arable land or dairy herds, people have had an incredibly challenging time, not just because of the phasing out of the basic payment scheme and the botched transition to the sustainable farming incentive, but because farmers with breeding herds trying to export to Europe have been badly let down by the botched Brexit deal. There is no timetable on the horizon for a phytosanitary agreement



to resolve that issue; I urge the Government to act at pace to resolve it for farmers who need to export abroad.

The changes to the inheritance tax threshold have been very badly communicated to farmers. According to the Government's figures, 288 farms in North Shropshire will be affected. Many of the farmers have been in touch with me, and they are extremely concerned, because they need more support not higher tax. If those farmers are wrong, I think the Government need to accept that their communication with them needs to be a great deal better, because at present they are very concerned. I urge the Government not to adopt a high-handed tone but to listen to and engage with them.

Farmers are also concerned because of flooding. They have had an extremely challenging time, with 18 months of continuous wet weather. Many in my constituency who lost a whole field or a larger area last year are still unable to re-till following an appalling October, but in Shropshire we have not been eligible for either the farming recovery fund or the frequently flooded allowance, although many of my constituents are underwater, reliably, every single year. I therefore urge the Government, when they look at flood defence spending, to consider those who are being clobbered by the weather year in, year out but have so far been ineligible to receive the support that they need to recover.

I also urge the Government to think about how the sustainable farming incentive might be used to encourage farmers to hold water upstream. An hon. Member—I apologise for forgetting which one—mentioned reservoirs; I urge the Government to consider building that issue into their plans, so that water can be managed effectively for the farmers who have had such an appalling time over the last 18 months.

Healthcare is problematic in rural areas. Because ours are not big university hospitals, it is difficult to attract staff to come and work in them—they are not necessarily looking at a glittering career investigating all sorts of exciting conditions—which means our health services are much worse than those elsewhere in the country. When I was elected, the problem of ambulance waiting times was the top issue that people raised on the doorstep, and it remains awful. October was the third worst month on record for handover delays at West Midlands ambulance service. Last week one of my constituents had to wait 24 hours in pain on a plastic chair before being diagnosed with heart difficulties. Every month over 2,000 patients spend more than 12 hours in the A&E departments of Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust.

We must address the important issue of the recruitment and retention of health staff in rural areas. Obviously, the Budget has raised the question of how healthcare providers will handle the increased NICs. That is probably an issue for a separate debate, but I urge those in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to liaise with their colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and discuss how we can get staff into rural areas and ensure that people have the same outcomes as those in the rest of the country, because at present they are being poorly served.

People need to have access to healthcare, as well as education and work opportunities, but transport is a huge problem, and that is killing off the high street. According to the jobcentre in Oswestry, the single biggest

issue is the inability of workers to get back into work because public transport is so poor that they cannot access a place of work. Shropshire has lost 63% of its bus miles since 2015, while the national average is 19%. That will give Members some idea of how difficult it is for us. In the Budget, the Government did not mention public transport investment in rural areas. I strongly urge the Minister to address that with his colleagues and, in particular, to consider really good schemes such as the Oswestry-Gobowen railway line, and the desperate public transport desert that is Market Drayton.

I have very little time, so I will just say this. The Government must make sure that the shared rural network is delivered and is effective, but if it is not, they must ensure that people can roam between networks. Local councils must be fairly funded so that the cost of delivering services over a vast area is reflected in the funding settlements that they receive. When it comes to healthcare, transport and digital services, rural areas are struggling, and we must have—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order.

7.43 pm

**Tim Roca** (Macclesfield) (Lab): Let me begin by paying tribute to our rural communities, on this Armistice Day, for their efforts in both the principal wars of the last century. We know that those wars shaped our rural communities. They asked a lot of the countryside, and indeed the farming that we see today was very much impacted and shaped by the events of the conflict at the beginning of the last century.

I thank the Government for holding this important debate on rural affairs. As we have heard, there is a rich seam of topics to discuss, including public transport, connectivity, the appalling state of rural NHS dentistry and the depletion of the wildlife in our countryside. Later this evening, the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) has an important Adjournment debate on mental health in rural areas, and I congratulate her on securing it.

I want to talk briefly about rural crime, because many of us will have constituents who have been affected by it. What I have found most shocking recently, in Macclesfield and in Cheshire as a whole, are the potential links to the war in Ukraine. Since 2022 there has been an increase in, particularly, the theft of GPS units from Cheshire's farm vehicles by organised gangs from eastern Europe, and the resulting insurance claims for the units increased by 137% last year alone. Each one of those units costs a staggering £20,000. Farmers use them to guide tractors, combine harvesters and other machinery to improve accuracy. It is now feared that they are being stolen and reconfigured as hardware in guidance systems being used in war in the other side of the continent.

Cheshire's police and crime commissioner has specifically drawn attention to the direct correlation between the vast increase in thefts and the start of the war in Ukraine. I commend the Government for instituting a cross-governmental rural crime strategy, but, along with other Members who spoke about this earlier, I call on them to do more to improve the security of essential farm equipment by working with manufacturers, because that is a practical measure that we can take. We need not only immobilisation technology but forensic marking on this gear, so that it can be tracked through the labyrinth of organised criminal gangs.

[Tim Roca]

I hope, having drawn attention to this practical and salient issue, that we have a chance not only to stop the rural crime that is damaging our communities and costing them a great deal of money—I believe that more than £4 million was shelled out by National Farmers Union insurers last year—but to stop the illegal flow of systems fuelling a war in another part of our continent.

7.47 pm

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): Some 88% of my constituency is hill, wood or farmland. It is the “Vale of Little Dairies”, in Thomas Hardy’s phrase. It is a mosaic of farms, both family-owned and estate and many of them tenanted, punctuated by villages and market towns. I would willingly swap my inbox with that of the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley)—who is no longer in the Chamber—because her constituency, like those of many Labour Members, seems to be full of farmers who are, with a spring in their step, welcoming the wonderful, halcyon field that the Government are offering them.

Let me make again a point that I made in an intervention earlier. I am still at a loss as to how farmers are supposed to be rejoicing, as we are told they are by so many Labour Members, with all this record investment and expenditure in rural areas, when they are being told by the Secretary of State that they must do more with less. You can have one or the other, Madam Deputy Speaker, but you cannot have both.

Many of my right hon. and hon. Friends have spoken very authoritatively about the taxation changes. I am fundamentally opposed to what the Government are trying to do because of the damage that it will cause, in the long term, in constituencies such as mine and many others—particularly, but not exclusively, in the south-west. It also concerns me that many Labour Members have been told that the money raised will give them an oncology centre in every constituency, and that other wonderful things are going to happen. In fact, this is just a round of drinks when it comes the amount of money that it will generate in taxation for what may be required by the health service or by education, so I say to the House, “Please do not fall for that old chestnut.”

The Minister and I worked very closely together on the Agriculture Act 2020 and on trade issues. Now is the opportunity—I have been very clear that we had opportunities over the last few years, but they were not delivered for a whole variety of reasons, including covid, Ukraine and other things that we all know about—to have some serious, grown-up thinking about rural-proofing policies, because, as others have mentioned, the delivery of public services in our rural areas is more expensive. Our populations are sparser, and our communities are further flung. As the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) said, we do not have big teaching hospitals and so forth. The Home Office needs to give proper consideration to rural-proofing the funding formula for rural policing, and likewise with the fire service. We have the rural services delivery grant, and I hope that the Minister and his departmental colleagues are strongly making the case to both the Treasury and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that

the rural services delivery grant is vital for enabling rural local government to deliver the services that our communities are looking for.

In an earlier contribution to the debate, reference was made to the entirely urban-centric rubric of Environment Agency funding decisions when it comes to flooding. It effectively boils down to how many chimneys benefit from the investment. The larger the community—by definition, the more urban or metropolitan—the more likely they are to be successful in a bid, compared with a scheme that will benefit many hundreds of acres of prime farmland but possibly only 200 or 300 households. There needs to be rural-proofing.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke:** My hon. Friend is hitting the nail on the head. In my speech, I mentioned that Tadcaster is unable to get rid of the surface water. That affects a few businesses, but the whole town is destroyed by those businesses not being able to reopen and having insurance problems, despite the fact that there are not enough houses under the Environment Agency’s plan. The point that the Environment Agency has to take notice of is, where does the economy build from?

**Simon Hoare:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Then we can think about the impact on insurance premiums, which will close businesses and put householders out of the insurance market, with the exception of the scheme that the previous Government introduced. All these things have knock-on effects.

I think the Minister and his departmental colleagues have sympathy with the point I want to make. Across Government—it is not just his Department—the funding formula and the rubric that decides where these things go need to have a far more digital, contemporary account of the challenges in delivering services in our rural areas. It is an issue that I have banged on about in this place in the nearly 10 years that I have served my communities of North Dorset, and I will continue to talk about it because that is the right thing to do. I hope that there is sympathy for that argument on both sides of the House.

Many Members have referred to access to housing. A lot of my constituents have invested in rental properties and so on, but we all know that quite a lot of housing in rural areas is older. It could be in a conservation area, it could be listed or it could be thatched—it could be all of those things. People are trying to meet the EPC regulations for rental properties, which is putting huge, artificial and urban-centric pressure on the rural rental housing market.

The Prime Minister recently launched a very welcome initiative about skills. Again, I urge that a bespoke channel of work is carved out that looks at how we skill young people in rural areas. We suffer from a young person’s diaspora too often: the elderly retire to an area, and the young move away. Property prices go up, and people will only come back as and when they are able to inherit something—that is, of course, on the presumption that the Treasury has not taken everything by that point and that the only thing they are able to inherit is a very small part of the family grave plot, although that might be taxed as well. I would urge a ruralisation of this area.

I will mention two other things, both of which begin with “d”. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have mentioned dentistry. There have been too many nascent

plans for a revival and renaissance of dentistry over the years. For reasons that I cannot understand, none has come to fruition, save for the entirely skewed and bogus funding formula for dentists. All Governments wed themselves to doing something; I just hope that something will be done. The other issue is driving tests. It is very hard to get a driving test in rural areas, which deprives young people of access to work, and to colleges and learning.

In this debate on rural affairs, it is not just about the proposals for changing the way farmers are taxed. It is about the whole mosaic and rich tapestry of rural life, of which this Government currently find themselves the custodians. Historically, the Labour party has always been urban-centric, but it now has some rural seats. I hope that the Front Benchers listen to rural Members, hear the concerns that we, too, are hearing, and actually make some progress towards making life in our rural areas a little better.

7.55 pm

**Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his remarks, and I particularly welcome his warm words on cleaning up our rivers, growing the rural economy and investing in flood defences. My constituents in Bolton West are extremely proud of our rivers, streams, waterways and lakes. They bring life to our countryside, and play a crucial role in preserving our biodiversity and fighting climate change—a danger all too real, given the increase in flooding and wildfires on the moors in my constituency. With that in mind, I wish to focus on access to our waterways and our countryside.

I am sure that colleagues will agree that I have the pleasure of representing the most beautiful constituency in the country, with Rivington, Winter Hill and the west Pennine moors all on our doorstep. That is why I am proud to say that the Labour party has a long history and proven track record of giving people freedom to enjoy our countryside, including through the National Parks Act and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. Indeed, the House will note that 2024 is the 75th anniversary of this seminal piece of legislation, and that Labour Governments also introduced the groundbreaking Countryside Act 1968 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. However, more than 20 years after the CROW Act was passed, access to nature is under threat.

The benefits of access to both the countryside and our waterways are well documented. Physical inactivity is associated with one in six deaths in the UK; according to the “Outdoors For All” campaign, it is estimated to cost us £7.4 billion every year. Obesity costs the UK £58 billion, and poor mental health costs the UK between £53 billion and £56 billion. That is why I welcome the Government’s commitment to get 3.5 million more people active by 2030 through their “Get Active” strategy and, likewise, their commitment to give the public access to green and blue spaces within a 15-minute walk of home through the environmental improvement plan, which is highly commendable. Currently, however, 19.6 million people do not enjoy that privilege. I draw the Minister’s attention to the “Outdoors For All” campaign, which is run by a coalition of 51 organisations, ranging from the National Trust and sporting national governing bodies such as Paddle UK to the British Mountaineering Council and the Wildlife Trust. The

campaign’s excellent manifesto calls for an extension of the public’s open access rights to the countryside and to water.

When it comes to recreation, the UK is truly a pioneer both in and on the water. Indeed, 7.5 million people were estimated to have gone paddling in 2023. Millions more row, sail and swim. However, access to our nation’s waterways is woefully inadequate compared with almost every nation in Europe and around the globe. The current policy of pursuing piecemeal voluntary access arrangements is plainly unworkable, because a river might cut through thousands of properties. How can one authority be expected to negotiate simultaneously with thousands of landowners and on behalf of the public? How can local arrangements provide the same clarity that our rights-of-way network grants walkers, given that arrangements may differ from river to river, boundary to boundary, and riverbank to riverbank? With more people than ever paddling and swimming for health and wellbeing, we have to reconsider our approach. The Secretary of State has repeatedly committed to expanding responsible access, and the Labour manifesto commits to nine new river walks. I would very much welcome more information on those in due course. It is high time for a White Paper on access to nature, including on our waterways. I hope that the Minister will consider that, and I would be happy to meet him or her to discuss it further.

I am aware of intensive lobbying by some landowners who see access to water or the countryside as an infringement on property rights. To those people I say: these spaces belong to all of us. A strong code of responsible access—such as the paddlers’ code, developed by Paddle UK and Natural England—would mitigate harm and disturbance to our precious environment. After all, look at all the work that recreational users, including paddlers, swimmers, rowers, anglers and sailors, have done to campaign for cleaner water, to clear plastic pollution, and to tackle invasive non-native species. In many cases, recreational users are the custodians of our nation’s waterways. Our ire should be directed at those responsible for the industrial-scale pollution in the water sector, and for the systemic run-off of chemicals into our waterways.

**Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend—like many Members across the House, I am sure—support the idea of a bathing status award for water quality?

**Phil Brickell:** Yes, I think there is considerable merit to making sure that not only our inland waters but our coastal waters are accredited with viable bathing status.

That brings me to my second topic. For years, under the previous Conservative Government, water companies have been pumping sewage into our rivers and lakes with little fear of consequences. We live in a country where parents think twice about letting their children surf, swim or paddle, for fear of them contracting all manner of diseases, some of them life-threatening, and that is frankly unacceptable. Surfers Against Sewage has done tremendous work in holding polluters to account, and I draw the Minister’s attention to its “End Sewage Pollution” manifesto.

Since 2019, under the Conservatives, untreated sewage has been discharged into our waters over 1 million times, and that requires real punishment for those who



[Phil Brickell]

flout the rules. To that end, I very much welcome the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which I hope will introduce new penalties for water companies and block bonuses for water bosses, who have all too often turned a blind eye to the damage that their firms have done to our waterways. To conclude, I ask the Minister for three simple things on behalf of my constituents: clean up our water; give us access to it; and invest to tackle flooding.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** We will go down to a five-minute time limit after the next speaker. I call Graham Leadbitter.

8.2 pm

**Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): First, I commend the maiden speakers in the House today. There have been some excellent maiden speeches. I particularly liked the reference by the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) to Tolkien, of whom I am a big fan, but today we are talking less about the bounteousness of the Hobbit's Shire and more about needing a wizard to figure out how the Budget is good for farmers.

Like many Members across the House representing rural areas, I have received significant correspondence from those on family farms, and from industry representatives such as the National Farmers Union of Scotland. The changes to inheritance tax and agricultural property relief have sent a wave of despair through the farming community, given the impact on family farms. Labour Members have referred to farmers having time to do financial planning, but significant sums of money will have to be put aside; if we were talking about pensions, we would say that people needed 10, 15 or 20 years to change their financial plans in that way.

The NFUS has given the example of a family farm worth £4 million. The vast majority of that value is tied up in farm buildings, machinery and livestock. A family member inheriting the farm could be liable for a £600,000 tax bill—a demand enforceable by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, with £60,000 due within six months. Let us be clear that for many people, the only way to cover that would be to sell off buildings, machinery or stock. That may inherently make the farm financially unviable and put the whole business at risk of failure.

A farm owner may choose to protect their family farm assets by selling off tenanted land, creating huge financial uncertainty for tenant farmers, and giving many cause to question whether it is worth continuing in farming. Food security is national security, but these measures are increasing uncertainty and insecurity for hard-working farming families—and in most farms, the whole family is working it together. A constituent wrote to me to say that APR is not a loophole, as has been suggested, but a targeted and necessary relief designed to support multi-generational businesses, food production and economic growth.

A second issue of real significance to my constituency is whisky tax. That might not immediately jump to mind when we think about rural affairs, but the vast

majority of the 48 distilleries in my constituency are in rural areas. The supply chain for those whisky distilleries is in rural areas; these are rural jobs. If the increase in whisky tax reduces sales, that reduces investment. Those 48 distilleries range from big corporates such as Diageo through to small independents, and even a community-run distillery; I recently had the pleasure of being at its opening. The supply chain includes farmers producing grains—this is a double whammy for farmers in my constituency, as many of them produce grain for the distilleries—as well as mechanical engineers, process engineers, hauliers, maltsters, plumbers, joiners, gardeners, tour guides and those working in retail and hospitality. All those jobs are in rural areas, and they are a lifeline source of well-paid, good employment for many rural communities in Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey.

A third impact that I want to touch on is forestry. Here I can maybe throw the Minister a bone, having had a bit of a go about the first two issues. On forestry, I think we have a lot in common. We want to see more housing built; I am very supportive of that. I also support the need to see progress on sustainable aviation fuel. Both of those rely on significant investment in forestry. There is a serious issue about the availability of new wood beyond 2035, and if we are to achieve progress on sustainable aviation fuel and house building, that needs to be in the balance. Forestry needs to be in balance with the rest of our agricultural land needs. I urge the Minister to commit to a statement on the future of forestry beyond 2035, in order to support those two objectives, which, as I say, I believe we share.

8.7 pm

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I congratulate those who made their maiden speech this afternoon. My constituency of Dunfermline and Dollar has a significant rural area, particularly through west Fife and Clackmannanshire. While rural areas often face different challenges from urban areas, the concerns are often the same. They include access to health, education, transport and other public services, so while this debate is about rural affairs, we must always be careful to ensure that we tackle the different challenges faced in rural areas with thoughtful consideration and sensitivity, and without creating division with those who live in urban and suburban areas.

I begin by mentioning concerns that farmers in my community have raised about changes in the Budget to agricultural property relief. Along with five Scottish Labour colleagues and Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, I was recently able to meet NFU Scotland and have a constructive conversation on that and other issues. It was disappointing, however, that no one from the Scottish National party was able to attend. Constructive engagement, rather than the often misleading and divisive rhetoric we have seen from some Conservative Members, will always be appreciated by our farming communities. I am awaiting further information from NFUS, but I believe that it understands the intention of the policy that has been announced, and our eagerness to work with it and others to support Scottish farmers.

My constituency includes former coalmining villages such as High Valleyfield, Oakley and Blairhall. Their rurality, along with high levels of deprivation, presents unique challenges. Bus services are irregular and unreliable, making access to healthcare difficult. It can take more

than an hour to get to Dunfermline by bus, a journey that takes just 15 minutes by car. Similarly, without a car it is next to impossible to access train or bus services to cities such as Edinburgh or Glasgow, while the lack of services after 6 pm in some areas means that park-and-ride options are not viable for those who want to commute by public transport.

Living in rural areas presents a further difficulty in accessing health services. Buses to either Forth Valley hospital near Falkirk or Victoria hospital in Kirkcaldy can take more than an hour, so getting to an appointment at a specific time without a car is difficult and very disruptive to day-to-day life. The community in High Valleyfield experienced this just over a year ago, when the breast screening van was withdrawn. People were then required to travel to Dunfermline, a journey of more than two hours each way. Sadly, I heard of women of all ages no longer making their appointments, and I do not think anyone in this House would want that. At a recent surgery in Dollar, I was told of the incredible challenges in accessing hospital transport services; the excessive bureaucracy and other barriers disadvantage people living in rural areas.

Although failing transport infrastructure causes challenges, digital infrastructure is similarly problematic and is not the panacea for accessibility that it is sometimes heralded as being. Rural areas suffer from delays in getting broadband infrastructure. Openreach was very excited to bring cabinet service to the village of Blairhall in my constituency. Everyone was looking forward to it, and it was completed—other than for seven houses on one street, where Openreach decided it was not commercially viable to introduce the service. The SNP's R100 programme, already delayed and over budget, will eventually get to delivering this upgrade, but not until 2026 or 2027.

After the pandemic, increasing numbers of tourists have sought to take advantage of the beauty to be found in rural Scotland. Tourists increasingly visit Culross, a village in my constituency where movies and TV shows such as "Outlander" were filmed. As we approach Christmas, the House might be interested to know that much of the film "Christmas in Scotland" was filmed in this beautiful village. But, of course, this brings its own pressures, as thousands of visitors and hundreds of tour buses visit Culross each week. I am delighted that Fife council is working with the excellent and very active Culross community council on these issues, but we must balance the needs of visitors with the needs of, and impact on, the local community.

I could go on and on about the fantastic rural communities in my constituency, but I will end with my commitment to continuing to champion and advocate for the different needs, priorities and considerations of our rural communities throughout my time in this House.

8.12 pm

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): There are many issues I could raise in such an important debate on rural affairs, but in their Budget a couple of weeks ago, the Labour Government introduced a new threat on such a scale that it simply must be the topic on which I open my remarks. As I said in last week's Budget debate, the changes to agricultural property relief are a threat to family farms and rural communities across the country, including in Mid Buckinghamshire. I cannot

believe that Mid Buckinghamshire farmers are so different from the farmers found in Labour-held constituencies, but many of the farmers who have contacted me are absolutely petrified about what the change means for the future of their farm. They tell me that they may even have to sell up to a third of their farm to meet their inheritance tax bill. There is no way to sugar-coat this: it will be the end of British family farming if these changes are allowed to go through.

When I gave my maiden speech on Second Reading of the Agriculture Bill in the last Parliament, the now Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, who was then a shadow Minister, kindly said in summing up that I was "every Cambridge leftie's nightmare", and I agree. I gently suggest that, if he does not talk to farmers, to the NFU and to the people who are petrified about what these changes will mean, he may well become the nightmare of every farmer in this country.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It may be that I am being generous, but I think this is happening because Labour Members have a patchy understanding of the issue. It is easy for those who do not understand rural Britain or agriculture to assume that assets and income are the same thing, but my hon. Friend will know that many farmers with considerable paper wealth do not actually make that much money.

**Greg Smith:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that British farming does not operate on mega margins. Our farmers do not have tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands or millions of pounds in the bank. They operate on such tight margins that, even if we play devil's advocate and accept the Government's argument—which, for the record, I do not—most farmers in this position will struggle to pay a tax bill of hundreds of thousands of pounds over a 10-year period. The margins simply are not there. Of course, there are many things that we can and should do to increase the profitability of farming, but it is fanciful to pretend that a 10-year payback period would be anywhere near enough. It would symbolise the end of British farming.

Of course, that was not the only threat to British farming in the Budget. There was the attack on basic equipment such as pick-up trucks, whereby farmers face paying an extra £5,000 simply for having the audacity to want back seats for their children. Then there is the carbon tax, which will see the cost of fertiliser rise by between £50 and £75 a tonne, which will have a detrimental impact on either farmers' margins or food prices, or potentially both. Across the country, either outcome would be devastating.

Other Members have spoken about rural crime, about which I too am incredibly frustrated. I intervened to ask the Secretary of State about this subject. After being lucky enough to come quite high in the 2022 private Member's Bill ballot, I spent two and a half years promoting my Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023, which requires immobilisers on quad bikes and high-standard forensic marking, including GPS units, on agricultural equipment. It requires the passage of a statutory instrument that the then Policing Minister and now shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), said was ready to go when the general election was called, but it was thwarted by the Dissolution of Parliament.

[Greg Smith]

The Act was passed with the Labour party's support. Labour Members did not howl it down or attack it on Second Reading, in Committee or on Third Reading in either House. It is not as if the Act is in any way controversial. We just need the statutory instrument to be passed to give the police the powers they need. Police officers like Superintendent Andy Huddleston, who is the National Police Chiefs' Council lead on rural crime, say that these powers will make a huge difference.

I have raised this matter with the Home Secretary and the Leader of the House. I doubt that this simple SI would cause any controversy for any party or any Member of this House. Why can the Government not introduce the statutory instrument? I take their desire to tackle rural crime at face value, so why do they not get the ball rolling on passing this legislation? Every time I meet a police officer from Thames Valley Police or anywhere I go in the country, the first thing they ask is, "What is happening with your Act?" I cannot answer that question, because I just do not know the reason for the Government's delay. I appeal to the Minister to work with his Home Office colleagues to find a way to get the Act functioning.

Finally, this Government's approach to planning and energy is causing devastation across our rural communities. My constituency has been plagued by so many ground-mounted solar applications—the largest one is Rosefield in the Claydons. These projects take away agricultural land, take away the ability to produce food and in many cases displace farmers, including tenant farmers. And what for? It is an inefficient technology that requires thousands of acres of agricultural land, when other technologies, such as small modular reactors, which require the equivalent of just two football pitches, can produce far more energy. I urge the farming Minister or the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to go into battle with the Energy Secretary and the Deputy Prime Minister on these planning changes, so that we can have a sensible approach to our countryside and keep it for what it is best at: the production of food.

8.19 pm

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): We have had an excellent and varied debate that perfectly illustrates the variety and colour of rural life in our country today. I want to concentrate on one aspect of rural life that blights the lives of people who live in rural north Cumbria, in my constituency, and across all of the UK: rural crime. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) on his work on this issue. I will certainly support him in trying to ensure that that statutory instrument is brought forward.

Rural crime, be it sheep rustling, fly-tipping or the theft of vehicles or equipment, has exactly the same impact on the communities and individuals it affects: it has a huge financial repercussion on everyone whose livelihoods rely on livestock and machinery for the generation of their income. It leaves rural communities feeling vulnerable and fearful for their personal safety. However, despite that financial and personal cost, it is a fact that rural crime rose under the last Government.

NFU Mutual's figures show that there was a 4.3% increase in crime in 2023, pushing the cost of rural crime to a shocking figure of over £52 million. In my own county of Cumbria, rural theft cost an estimated £815,000—a rise of 12% on the previous year. It is clear that criminal gangs have been able to take advantage of the holes left in rural frontline policing, as a direct result of cuts to rural police forces under the last Government, to target farmyards and fields across Britain.

Rural crime is no longer the preserve of the opportunist thief. Instead, we now see internationally organised criminal activity, with gangs that target high value farm machinery and GPS kits, knowing that they can be sold all over the world. That degree of serious organised crime demands a serious, organised response, and I am pleased that it is this Government that are delivering that response in the form of a cross-governmental rural crime strategy.

In Cumbria, our new Labour police, fire and crime commissioner is committed to building on the work of our dedicated rural crime team, which recently marked its first anniversary. During that year, the team recovered stolen property worth £820,000, cut quad bike thefts by 10% and made dozens of arrests. More importantly, that same team engaged directly with rural communities, making over 200 visits to victims of rural crime.

**Sir John Hayes:** If I can be helpful to the hon. Lady, the critical thing is to get the police funding formula reviewed. It disadvantages counties like Cumbria and Lincolnshire, and has done for years. No Government, Labour or Conservative, has dealt with that. Will she join me in writing to the Minister, and perhaps to the Treasury, to suggest that we do just that in order to prioritise rural areas like hers and mine?

**Ms Minns:** I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. As we have heard, funding for rural communities affects not just crime and policing, but the availability of GPs, healthcare and dentistry. If anyone on the Conservative Benches would like to explain to my constituents why they have to go on a 100 mile round trip to register with an NHS dentist, I would happily take that intervention.

On the point about personalised engagement with rural communities, I draw the House's attention to the dedication of one particular rural police officer in my constituency: PC Susan Holliday. I should declare that Susan and I have been friends for over 50 years, and she has spent 37 of those years as a special constable in Cumbria constabulary, clocking up over 5,000 hours in her own time in the last decade alone, and exhausting every possible long-service award available to her as a special constable and that she is entitled to. Herself a farmer, Susan was integral to the setting up of Cumbria constabulary's farm watch scheme, and she is well known to the rural communities across the north of my constituency.

Sadly, the excellent work of officers like Susan was too often undermined by the cuts to frontline policing that we saw in 14 years of chaotic Conservative Government. Those 14 years saw the closure of rural police stations and the diversion of officers away from their rural beats to plug the gaps in policing in our towns and city centres. It is not before time that we finally have a Government that will back our frontline rural police



officers with a rural crime strategy. That strategy will increase police patrols in rural areas, has tougher measures to clamp down on antisocial behaviour and has stronger laws to prevent farm theft, fly-tipping and drug dealing. I am delighted that this Government will deliver the rural crime strategy that communities like mine in north Cumbria so desperately need.

8.26 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I live on our family farm and declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union. As most Members are aware, I represent a rural constituency with a thriving agrifood sector. We grow it, we package it and we sell it. I dare say that most right hon. and hon. Members in this House will have sampled what Strangford has to offer. For instance, the potatoes grown in my constituency go all over Great Britain. I am pleased that those potatoes are a protected product; they were protected under EU law when we were in the EU, and they are protected now as well.

Lakeland Dairies supplies milk to London hotels and to aeroplanes. My neighbour's farm supplies milk to that dairy, whose processing plant is a huge employer in my largest town, Newtownards. Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct supply convenient prepacked goods to shops throughout the UK and further afield. Rich Sauces produces condiments that are shipped globally. All of those local business are doing our national business, and we are all the better for it. Sometimes it is better to promote those goods within the great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland together, so when the Minister sums up, will he give me some ideas about how that can be done? I know he is committed to that, but I am keen for *Hansard* to have it on the record.

The rural economy in Northern Ireland is our mainstay. Our focus in this place is not simply to allow it to survive, but to allow it to thrive further. All of those businesses have the potential to do more. Farming is the biggest industry in Northern Ireland, with 75% of land used for agriculture. There are some 25,000 farm businesses in Northern Ireland and some 48,000 jobs, which provide £1.7 billion of value added to the Northern Ireland economy, which is 3.5% of the total gross value added. With great respect to colleagues on the Conservative Benches and across the Chamber, the equivalent figure for the whole of the UK is 2%, so for us in Northern Ireland, what happens with agriculture is crucial and critical.

The gross output of agriculture in 2020 was £2.2 billion, while the gross output of food and drinks processing was £5.4 billion. The ripple effect is even greater, estimated at almost £5 billion when we account for the indirect contribution to a wide variety of sectors, including construction and hospitality.

My party will continue to ask for the remaining problems with the Northern Ireland protocol to be addressed. Again that is not the Minister's direct responsibility, but I ask him to pass that on to the relevant Minister. The problems include the fact that because of state aid restrictions, businesses operating in primary agriculture and horticulture, fish processing, aquaculture and bio-based fuels are not eligible to apply for the agrifood investment initiative, which has been designed to support businesses in Northern Ireland who have additional shipping and transportation costs, and costs due to economy of scale,

that make competition more difficult. I would really appreciate a response on that point. I like to be constructive and positive if I can in my comments. There are still businesses that cannot apply for the support due to the restrictions and that must be tackled. I look to the Minister to liaise with Cabinet colleagues to secure UK food security by securing agrifood in Northern Ireland.

The Minister knows that I respect him greatly, but I have to say that the Government have got the inheritance tax issue wrong. Shrinking farms by requiring them to sell 20% of the farm land to pay inheritance tax is not the way to promote food security or indeed to allow us to be self-sustaining. I repeat my calls for a rethink of this brutal tax reform, which actively harms not simply our farming community but anyone who buys British goods in the shop. Over the weekend a local estate agent told me—I am not making this up—that multiple farms have already requested a valuation to be carried out of the fields that they will not farm but keep to sell to pay the tax bills. There is already a knock-on effect.

The Secretary of State kindly made me an offer, and I will take him up on it. I have already contacted the Ulster Farmers' Union to put the appointment in place. Northern Ireland leads the way in farming and the message is clear: release the chokehold and support us or our land will go for planning houses, and we will give up family farms treasured for centuries to pay the highway man. As one farmer said to me, "They aren't coming for the family silver as we don't have any. We only have the ability to grow food and they are taking that not from our family alone, but from every family in this United Kingdom." That is wrong.

8.31 pm

**Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): I will never get tired of saying how proud I am to represent rural communities in York Outer, especially when it comes to food production. From carrots to chicken, or parsnips to pigs, if there is a perfect place in the country to see your dinner go from farm to fork, look no further than York.

Now then, on the topic of Yorkshire folk, we are a hard-working bunch. I am a prime example, trying to squeeze my Yorkshire dialect into *Hansard*. In all seriousness, there are few harder workers than our farmers, famed for hard graft, which is why I have been spending so much time engaging with them across York Outer. I have been to several farms in my constituency, and I have met my local NFU, but I know that supporting rural communities means focusing on the longer term, not just the here and now. That is why I will focus my comments on flooding, biosecurity and mental health—three vital cross-party issues that we can tackle together.

It is well known that we suffer from flooding in York, with two rivers—the Foss and the Ouse—in our city. When they overflow, they devastate communities and crops. The use of agricultural land is a hot topic in the House, but in York persistent flooding is a big driver of the loss of land. I will depart from party politics for a second, because I know that my predecessors in York from all parties have done a good job locally on flooding, and I intend to do the same. That is why I have already had some positive chats with the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy).

[Mr Luke Charters]

Our Government are doing good work on flooding. I welcome the £60 million that the Secretary of State rapidly released for communities last month, and the investment of more than £2.4 billion over two years in flood resilience. The issue with flooding in the past is that we have needed a quicker release of funds, and I hope that will be a priority for the Government.

The biggest issue for me nationally is biosecurity. This week, I will visit the Animal and Plant Health Agency in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for food security. Whether it is the new H5N5 variant of avian influenza—which is incredibly contagious—the recent outbreak of bluetongue or African swine fever, these are all real risks that our farmers tell me they are worrying about. That matters to me too, not least with recent avian influenza cases reported in Yorkshire.

I had a wonderful bacon sarnie at Wilson's farm. From the butter to the bap to the bacon, it was all locally produced, and that sent me an important message. The Government must buy local when it comes to procurement. School dinners must be local. We must promote British farming, including in this place where we could purchase more British farming products.

We also need to do more to end farmwashing. Some of the farmers in my patch were telling me about quite deceptive food packaging, with red, white and blue, and tractor logos that narrowly get through advertising regulations, only for customers to turn the back of the packet and see that the product came from a farm in Spain, Ireland or elsewhere. We have to sort that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) on securing tonight's Adjournment debate on farmers' mental health. When considering the future of the NHS, it is so important that we not only fix the waiting lists and implement the reforms needed but always think of our cherished rural communities. Food security is national security, and mental health is just as important as physical health. That is why I am always willing, as all of us in this place are, to talk to farmers about what they are going through.

Rural communities voted for change earlier this year. That is why there are many Labour MPs who are hard-working advocates for their rural communities—as passionate as I am. Thankfully, the Government have had a strong start. These topics have a big impact on my constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) invited the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs to Cumbria; I invite him to stop at York along the way to discuss some of these hugely important topics. I will always be a champion for our rural communities, and I will work cross-party on many of the issues that I have mentioned.

8.35 pm

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Rural communities form the backbone of our country. They grow the food that feeds British families, they are the custodians of our beautiful countryside, and they are home to fantastic village pubs such as the Knife & Cleaver in Houghton Conquest, the Crown in Shillington and the Anchor in Aspley Guise—a shameless plug for three of my fantastic pubs. We all know that fantastic British pubs are the heart of our villages, but I am

concerned that they will now struggle to stand still, never mind invest and give youngsters the opportunity of their first job, given the Government's choice to tax jobs and working people. Pubs across my constituency have told me of their concerns, and I told them that I would raise them today on the Floor of the House.

The problems that we face in rural communities are a world away from those faced by hon. Friends in urban areas. We suffer from similar crimes to urban areas, with particular problems around fly-tipping, wildlife crime and rural theft. Members throughout the House have spoken about those issues at length. I urge the Government to ensure that rural communities are not overlooked in favour of urban areas when they allocate police funding. That is certainly a concern of my constituents, who see police resources soaked up by the high demand in neighbouring large towns.

In parts of my constituency, the benefits of working from home are limited by poor-quality broadband, which limits the growth prospects of some of our brilliant local entrepreneurs and family businesses. Project Gigabit must be delivered at pace, and I will support any measures and efforts to do that.

Bus services are often infrequent and unreliable, and unfortunately under this Government they are getting more expensive. Inequalities extend beyond transport; access to healthcare is challenging, particularly if people cannot or do not drive. I am keen to ensure that my communities have better access to local healthcare, which is an ambition of the Government. We need to do more in this Parliament to ensure that primary care reaches into our villages and hamlets, and that no one is left without the healthcare they need because of where they live.

As the Government consider their plans to build the communities of the future, I hope they will learn from our villages. Decades—centuries, even—of sympathetic development have created communities: places that people want to live and spend time in. We must ensure that the legacy we leave for future generations includes sustainable and beautiful homes, with the right services and good access to the countryside.

**Sir John Hayes:** Such is my hon. Friend's insight that he has drawn together two fundamental issues. Over-development in rural areas places immense pressure on infrastructure such as healthcare provision, as he described. Does he agree that development should be incremental, so that no community changes beyond recognition, or can no longer be served by the kind of public services that are critical to wellbeing?

**Blake Stephenson:** I entirely agree. A lot is said about sustainable development in planning rules. I know from my community that lots of people feel quite aggrieved by large new developments being built on the edge of villages, fundamentally changing their character. There is more work to do to ensure that our villages grow slowly and sustainably, alongside infrastructure. Lessons should be learned from the many decades of mistakes.

That brings me to another point. We must ensure that our villages are not overwhelmed by suburban dormitories. I am afraid that even though they are rural, some of my communities have been turned into dormitories by house building. People sleep there but head elsewhere to work, so they do not contribute to our local communities as they would have done in the past.

Often, at the heart of our rural communities is a group of unsung people—although they have been much mentioned today—who look after our countryside, employ local people and ensure that every single person in this country has food on their table. They are, of course, our farmers. British farmers might not always seek the spotlight—although sometimes they have shows on Amazon Prime—but without them we would be a much poorer country and our rural communities would be significantly worse off.

We should do all we can to support British farmers and nurture the next generation of them, but instead the Government are regrettably levying a spiteful family farm tax on them. I met farmers in Mid Bedfordshire recently. It is clear that the attack on family farms will force many families to sell up to developers or big international farming corporations, ripping the soul out of our rural communities. For the long-term sustainability of rural communities up and down the country, I urge the Government to reconsider the damaging family farm tax.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Before I call the next speaker, I inform the House that I am now imposing a four-minute time limit.

8.41 pm

**Chris Hinchliff** (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I thank the Government for so guilelessly bringing forward such a broad debate allowing those of us with rural constituencies to make wide-ranging demands on behalf of the towns and villages that we represent. I look forward to further inundating Ministers' in-trays with legions of letters about agriculture in Anstey, school buildings in Baldock and potholes in Furneux Pelham. However, before I am accused of being excessively parochial, I will address the wider systemic issues that undermine rural life in this country.

Fundamentally, the problem facing towns and villages such as those across North East Hertfordshire is that for decades almost every aspect of national life has been increasingly geared towards putting profit maximisation before the needs of our communities. Nowhere is that more evident than in our housing sector. Rural areas must deal again and again with totally unsustainable speculative developments dominated by houses designed to maximise profit, on a scale completely unrelated to local needs for organic growth.

At the same time, house prices have continued to rise—almost always far beyond the reach of those who have grown up locally—rural homelessness has risen by 40% and local facilities have declined. In one of my local towns, Buntingford, hundreds of new houses have been built, yet it has lost its youth centre, the bank, the community swimming pool, a GP surgery, a daycare centre and the local waste disposal site—those facilities are all gone. The volume of new housing is putting such strain on the infrastructure that residents are repeatedly flooded by raw sewage. I am afraid it is of little consolation that the big developers, which the Tories allowed to force through applications on appeal, have been enjoying supernormal profits as a result.

The systemic failures are not unique to rural housing. Our public transport system is next to non-existent in many villages—cutting off young adults from opportunities

for work and education, and stranding older residents in loneliness and isolation—because the only bus services that ran under the Tories were those that made profits for shareholders. We expect farmers to steward our land for future generations, but they have—between the monopsonistic power of the major supermarkets and the pressure of global commodity markets—been pushed into the absurd position whereby it is increasingly impossible to make a fair living out of feeding the nation. All that points to economic policy that has consistently failed to recognise the intrinsic value that my constituents place on the rurality of their communities. For too long, economic orthodoxy that is obsessed with agglomeration and utilitarian accounting has proven incapable of recognising the social value of investing in less densely populated areas.

To conclude, given the vast change in political representation of rural areas at the recent election, the Government clearly have a unique opportunity and obligation to deliver systemic change that creates a future in which our towns, villages and hamlets thrive as communities in their own right. Ministers have made an important start with policies to refocus house building on delivering new social homes, by paving the way for re-regulation of bus services, by delivering the largest ever budget for sustainable food production, and with a clear commitment to community energy. Today, I urge them to press on further as swiftly as possible by restoring services to our towns and villages and retaining their rurality; by recognising at last that, depleted as it is, the natural capital of our countryside is the better part of the wealth of our nation; and by redirecting investment, leaning into the growth of distributed technologies and remote working, and delivering a new revolution in cottage industries to once again spread economic opportunities across places such as those I represent.

8.45 pm

**Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): My constituency and its neighbouring villages are defined by their green space and rurality, providing a sharp contrast to the urban west midlands next door. Our villages are home to rural enterprises and to farmers, and it is our farmers who are the lifeblood of our rural communities. Their role cannot be overstated: not only do they provide us with food security, but they contribute significantly to our local economy, and it is critical that we support them. Every single one of us relies on farmers three times a day. They are the guardians of our countryside, often working in isolated or harsh conditions, physically and in a competitive marketplace. I am delighted to be participating in the NFU's MP fellowship scheme to better understand the pressures that farmers face.

The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State promised to protect farmers. They promised not to change inheritance rules, but then in the autumn Budget, among many other broken promises, Labour broke its pledge to farmers. It reduced reliefs and imposed inheritance tax rates on farmland, which will devastate family farms and pose a serious risk to domestic food security and food prices in our country. Not only do those changes hurt the agriculture sector and our economy, but they hurt individual farming families, with at least 249 farms affected across my constituency. I want the House to be aware of the specific concerns of two of my constituents. One wrote to me:



[Bradley Thomas]

“This specifically targeted decision will eventually destroy family farms. It’s a mentally and physically hard industry to be in but for most has been passed on from previous generations and do it for the love. As an industry we feel we are no longer needed”.

The most impactful email I have received from a constituent came in late last night.

**Sir John Hayes:** Just before my hon. Friend comes to that impactful email, may I say that he makes a fundamentally important point about food security? Food security is vital to national economic resilience, as we have seen from the covid pandemic, the war in Ukraine and so on. Food security means maximising the productivity of land, so does my hon. Friend agree that another threat that farmers and rural communities face is the invasion of large-scale solar developments and other industrialisation of the countryside, which is taking productive farmland out of the business of producing food and thereby guaranteeing food security?

**Bradley Thomas:** I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend. As he rightly points out, we are at risk of large-scale industrial energy production installations becoming the new cash crop, displacing valuable agricultural land across our constituencies.

I want the House to be aware of a comment from a constituent who wrote to me last night:

“I have never written a personal email to an MP before but feel so strongly about the recent changes announced in the budget that I couldn’t let them go. Although on paper we might appear ‘rich’ the reality is we only make enough money each year to support...2 families and don’t have ‘millions’ in the bank. We pay our taxes like every other working person does. Every spare penny we get we invest in the farm to make it better for the next generation but after the budget announcements last week feel that that was a waste of time. I am beginning to think that the best option for my family would be to sell up and move abroad to a country that appreciates its farmers and food.”

That is devastating, and I want the Government to reflect on those words very carefully.

I recall the Prime Minister’s words in his first speech in Downing Street, where he said that he wanted the Government to “tread more lightly” on our lives. Sadly, the Government are doing anything but; they are ruthlessly bearing down on every facet of British society in the most ideological fashion. I call on them to scrap the family farm tax and instead support British farmers. I also call on the Government to reverse the changes to tax on pick-up trucks, which are the workhorses of the countryside and of tradesmen and women across the country.

Although much of the debate has focused on farms, it is important to highlight that there is more to the rural economy than just our farmers. The countryside makes up more than 90% of the UK’s land. It is home to millions of people in our country and it contributes more than £270 billion per annum to our economy, from farming and horticulture to stewardship of the land and countryside sports. For our rural economy to thrive there needs to be sufficient infrastructure to attract people and businesses to those areas, including further investment in rural connectivity and mobile coverage.

Finally, our rural economy cannot exist if our rural areas are developed over. New housing developments cannot come at the expense of our green belt. Some 89% of land in my constituency is formally designated

as green belt, but the target being imposed by the Government will directly result in thousands more homes being built on high-quality green-belt land in my constituency, which will undermine food security and our rural identity.

We must stand up for our rural communities and for farmers, and we must protect our countryside. I will always defend farms, the rural economy and our rural areas during my time in the House.

8.50 pm

**Sam Carling** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Some 81% of the land in the area that I represent is agricultural, meaning that North West Cambridgeshire, like much of the east of England, contributes a great deal to our country’s food security. As the Government have repeatedly and rightly said, food security is national security, and I am proud that my constituents play a huge role in that.

Farmers suffered under the last Government. Just before the general election, farmer confidence was at its lowest level since records began, but this Government are taking positive steps to reverse that trend. The farming budget for 2025-26 will be £2.4 billion, which is the biggest budget ever directed at sustainable food production, and will be vital for farmers across the country and in my constituency.

For those affected by flooding last year, I welcome the immediate £60 million made available from the farming recovery fund, which is a big increase compared with the figure under the last Government. I was also glad to hear the Secretary of State clarify earlier that the “vast majority” of farmers will not be affected by the change to agricultural property relief, and his assurances that the Government will protect family farms by preventing people coming from outside and buying farmland over the heads of local people to evade taxes.

One of the most pressing and significant issues that farmers have raised with me is the income of food producers. The dynamic between buyers and producers needs reform, with many producers reporting that they take under 1% of profit after retailers and intermediaries have taken their cut. With more than 95% of our food sold through just 10 retailers, many feel that some supermarkets are not giving them a fair deal. I strongly encourage the Government to look at that issue.

I also welcome the Secretary of State’s earlier comments about ensuring that trade deals do not undermine our farmers. For too long, we have allowed imports of food, both plant and animal products, that has been produced to lower standards than we expect of our farmers. That undermines them and tilts the playing field towards imported food because it prevents them competing on price. We must take action on that.

I now turn to rural crime. Many of our country’s rural towns have significant problems with crime, with a lower police presence following cuts under the last Conservative Government and an under-resourced justice system that has not been able to cope. My constituency has several rural towns and villages, including Ramsey, which has faced a string of robberies and knife-related incidents in recent years. Although the offenders in many of those incidents have been arrested and charged—I thank Cambridgeshire police for that—we must resource our police to restore their ability to work on prevention, not just to respond to crises.

The Government stood on a clear pledge to combat crime in our towns by bringing back neighbourhood and community policing with thousands of additional officers. Rural towns such as Ramsey must get their fair share of that, and I know that the Government are hearing that message.

Transport is also a significant issue, with limited public transport options in Ramsey and other towns. People living in rural areas often have fewer options for services, including education, employment and health services, and those who rely on public transport, which can be limited and inconvenient, are at a double disadvantage. Timetabling decisions based on commercial factors mean that children who live in rural areas in my constituency struggle to get to school, particularly in the village of Wittering.

**Ben Obese-Jecty:** Buses in Cambridgeshire are controlled by the combined authority and its Labour Mayor. Will the hon. Member, whose constituency neighbours mine, put pressure on Mayor Johnson to ensure that all our rural communities are included in the bus franchising and that we get the services that are desperately needed? As the hon. Member has pointed out, the Mayor is failing in that respect so far.

**Sam Carling:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. He claims that bus services are under the control of the combined authority, but the problem is that we do not have franchising yet. We are working on that and, in case any of my constituents are listening, the consultation is still open but will close on 20 November, so please fill it in—I just wanted to get that plug in.

In the lead-up to franchising, which will hopefully come through, the combined authority is already working to subsidise essential services and working with commercial companies to tackle the issues. I am confident in the work that we are doing. I am proud that the Government's better buses Bill will deliver the opportunity for franchising to more local authorities. I urge the Government to keep making progress on making franchising easier, alongside their progress on nationalising our rail infrastructure, which we heard more about earlier.

Broadband connectivity must be another priority. Internet and mobile phone coverage has improved, but the service for people living in rural areas still has a long way to go. As of January, 47% of rural premises had access to gigabit-capable broadband, compared with 84% of premises in urban areas. That has serious implications for productivity, making it harder for people to work from home who would otherwise do so, for example. More widely, it has an impact on the ability to stay in contact with friends and loved ones who may be further afield.

I thank all hon. Members across the House for raising so many points today. I look forward to the Minister's response.

8.56 pm

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): I and residents and visitors alike love North Norfolk. However, we have to be honest about the challenges that rural areas like mine face, and about the changes and support that we need to tackle them.

Ten days ago, I had the pleasure of chairing a public meeting in the village of Hickling about the flooding issues facing the area. We brought together key stakeholders from no fewer than nine agencies to discuss with villages how we can prevent the cycle of flooding that has plagued the area for years on end. I was delighted to hear those agencies' clear desire to work together in a more joined-up way, but they were all resolved on the need for longer-term planning. Giving budgets only one year at a time is not good enough for forward planning, let alone for investing in partnerships, strategies and skills.

The same goes for coastal erosion. We are part of the fastest-eroding coastline in north-west Europe. That erosion has a very real human impact: sadly, Bryony is soon to join the list of Happisburgh residents who have been forced to leave their forever home as the coastline erodes. She is passionate about making sure that more residents do not find themselves in the heartbreaking situation of losing the home they love to the North sea. Local campaign groups and councils are doing what they can to mitigate the effects, but they cannot keep to-ing and fro-ing between project funding. We need a joined-up strategy along the entire coastline to protect our beautiful environment, our heritage and our way of life, not just the highest possible number of chimney pots.

Buses in our villages and market towns are the only way many people can make it to work, education, medical appointments or shops and meet their friends and family. We need to radically rethink the delivery of public transport in rural areas like mine and create a network that really works for the communities it serves. I welcome the Government's steps forward on bus franchising measures, but Norfolk needs greater powers to deliver change. I really hope that as the Government return to the drawing board—not their fault—on a devolution deal for our area, they will reflect on how giving greater powers to our community to design and deliver services could unlock Norfolk's potential.

I must mention the deep concern across North Norfolk about the family farm tax included in the Budget. The Secretary of State made a good impression on farmers in Norfolk. "He gets it," they said, and I think he does, so this must be really hard and uncomfortable for him and his team. Farmers have been the backbone of North Norfolk for generations—everybody knows a farming family or is in one—but they are really worried about their future. Others are worried about the impact on our area. I fear that the Government are just not in tune with what is happening to family farms in small areas like mine. They must tune into the realities. I am proud to speak up for farmers and farming today, and I will keep doing it at every opportunity. I love living in my rural area, and it is a pleasure to raise my children there, but we cannot accept half measures on the challenges we face. We need a better rural deal from Government, and dedicated, long-term strategies to protect our rural and coastal places.

9 pm

**Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): Given the time limit, I cannot deliver the magnum opus I wrote on the train on the way down here, but having been told in a call with Northumberland county council that one of the school catchment areas in my constituency is larger than the area surrounded by the M25, I think I can speak on rural affairs with authority.

[Joe Morris]

It has been said to me in my constituency when I have been out and about that we pay more and get less in our communities. We go to smaller shops, so we have to buy things that are less efficiently priced; and our communities are used to being forgotten. They are used to being under-invested in, and to seeing their younger people leave due to the inability to find an appropriate job and home. One of the real tragedies of the last 14 years has been the Conservative party's failure to appreciate that, and to invest in those communities. I gently invite Conservative Members to reflect on the reason why I stand here as the first ever Labour MP for Hexham, and why so many of my party colleagues represent rural constituencies. It is not just because it was a change election; it is because the Conservatives fell out of sync with what rural communities wanted and needed.

I am very proud to be out there working with and meeting local civic organisations, such as the Clean Tyne campaign led by Dr Stephen Westgarth, or Sustainable Haltwhistle. I have also sat at the kitchen table with my farmers to talk about the issues with the sustainable farming incentive, and payment schemes that do not really work for upland farmers. I invite the Secretary of State or the Minister responsible for farming to come and meet upland farmers in my constituency, who have really positive stories about the work they want to do, but who have been disadvantaged and had their hands tied by the legacy we have inherited.

I would like briefly to plug my Westminster Hall debate on school transport in Northumberland tomorrow. Although I will be speaking about school transport in that county, I would very much welcome participants from across the country, as I know that getting to school and accessing a great state education is fundamental for everyone.

Finally, I would like to touch on the health of the rivers. The north-east is one of the most iconic parts of the UK. We have Hadrian's wall and some of the most stunning countryside in the UK, and we are a region defined by our rivers, including the Tyne, Tweed, Coquet, Wansbeck and Aln. One of the many reasons why I was sent to this place was the state of the River Tyne; it was seen by my community as an "open sewer", to quote one person I spoke to on the doorstep, and there was an absolute lack of faith in the previous Government to get it cleaned up. The north-east would not be in the minds of so many people across the world if it was not for our rivers, and I absolutely welcome the steps this Government are already taking to clean them up. I know it will not be a quick process, but I look forward to working with them.

I want to touch on a few speeches by Opposition Members that were very constructive. They talked about rural-proofing policy, which is incredibly important. Rural policy should not just come up when the DEFRA team is sat on the Front Bench; it needs to be at the heart of every single thing this Government do to get our schools working, our economy moving, and our energy policy right.

**Jayne Kirkham:** In my constituency of Truro and Falmouth, housing is a major issue, as it is in many rural communities. Does my hon. Friend agree that we

must take action on housing? We should, in particular, consider the impact of second homes in our rural communities.

**Joe Morris:** I absolutely agree. When I go to places like Bellingham, where I have a constituency surgery coming up soon, I am often told about the impact of second homes on the community. It contributes to a decline in a sense of place and in opportunities, and of course it crowds out younger people from getting on to the housing ladder. I agree that we urgently need to look at that, and I hope that the Government will consider it strongly.

Briefly, in the time I have left, I will celebrate the rural crime strategy. Members from all parts of the House have spoken about it a lot. During the election campaign, I spoke to a farmer who had someone try to nick her quad bike. She confronted him and had to wait 30 minutes for a police officer to arrive. She said that was a speedy response, and she was quite pleased with it. That just shows the level to which rural crime fighting sank under the previous Government.

9.5 pm

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): As a past president of the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster and a former director of Rural Support, which is a mental health charity supporting farmers and farm families across Northern Ireland, I have worked on cases where farm families have been through foot and mouth, swine flu, avian influenza and TB. I have seen the impact. They have had to deal with complete herds being removed. However, I have never encountered so many farmers in Northern Ireland being as low as they are this minute, due to the farm family inheritance tax put on them by this Government in this place. They are so angry about what is happening.

The Secretary of State talked about not listening to the fury, or the alarming headlines, but a third of farms in Northern Ireland will be affected. Some 75% of our local dairy sector farms will be affected. Those on the Government Front Bench say, "No, they will not", but that is the assessment of the Agriculture Minister in the devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland.

**Daniel Zeichner:** He is wrong.

**Robin Swann:** It is also the assessment of the Ulster Farmers Union. I encourage the Government Front Benchers to engage with the devolved Administrations, because if our Agriculture Minister in Northern Ireland is causing alarm and raising headlines that are not accurate, it is up to this Government to correct that. That is the impact, and the feedback that I am receiving from farms, farm families and our Agriculture Minister in the devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland.

I spoke to a friend over the weekend who is a bit younger than me, with a young family. He is now concerned about shackling his family farm to his children. He has been progressive, and has taken up every financial opportunity to progress the family farm and make sure that it is fit for purpose. He now says that if he has to pay 10 years of inheritance tax, that is 10 years in which he will not be investing in his farm, and its productivity. The average income in Northern Ireland is £27,345, and these measures are making our family farms unsustainable.



I think the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) mentioned devolved farming payments now becoming a Barnett consequential for Northern Ireland. I would love clarity from Treasury or DEFRA Ministers on who asked for that, because it was not Northern Ireland. It sounds as if it was not Wales, so why was that change made to how agricultural support goes to our devolved Administrations? On whose advice and guidance was that change made? What engagement did the Treasury or the Government have with the devolved institutions prior to making it? There are other issues on matters that are not devolved, but those were the two main ones I wanted to speak about.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Members will have observed that we have more Members standing than is possible to fit into the time we have. I propose an immediate three-minute time limit. Please be mindful that we may not get everybody in, even with that time limit.

9.9 pm

**John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab):** An excellent climate adaptation world café event was held in Rugby town hall on Saturday, organised by my colleague Councillor Alison Livesey, officers and others. It was attended by the public, community groups and indeed the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh). I am grateful to her for that. At the event, local councillors told me details of the unprecedented floods last winter in the villages of Wolston and Brandon, on the road near Bretford, and in surrounding areas. Significant damage was done to homes and property, and the Royal Oak pub in Brandon closed 11 times. I have met the owner, Khara Schrijvers, and seen the new flood barriers at the pub, which will hopefully ensure the dryness that pubs like in future. The people of these villages came together and showed the very best of community spirit and human nature as they helped one another. Earlier this year, the Wolston and Brandon flood action group was formed, partly in response to the lack of preparedness.

I know that this Government are doing much more than the previous Government; there is £2.4 billion extra over two years for flood defences and other innovations. When the heavens opened again this September, Ministers worked hard to co-ordinate and empower the various agencies, councils, emergency services and, ultimately, local communities. It is vital that the voices of local communities be heard. Parish councils are an important conduit for that. Listening locally is not only morally right, but the intelligent approach, because the intelligence garnered is more likely to be right and helpful in preventing future flooding. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister can reassure my constituents that the new Labour Government place flood resilience and climate adaptation and mitigation high up our list of priorities, and place rural villages and communities at the heart of all we do in this and other areas of policy.

9.11 pm

**Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD):** Yesterday, I spoke to Ian, who has a beef enterprise and grows cider apples on his farm in Glastonbury. Now 74,

he has worked his entire life to buy back his family's 100-acre farm. He has finally done it, but the Government's changes to the APR will soon tear it apart again, undoing his life's work and leaving the farm unviable.

Sadly, Ian is not alone. During the debate, I read an email from a farmer in Charlton Musgrove who says that her family are shell-shocked by Labour's attack on family farms. The farming sector has experienced one shock after the other in recent years, from Brexit to energy prices, the war in Ukraine, rising feed prices, the Conservatives' terrible trade deals and mismanagement of the economy, and the botched transition from the basic payment scheme to the environmental land management schemes. Farming is in crisis, and here we are yet again with a misguided policy that hits the future sustainability of family-run farms.

We cannot allow this to continue as a sterile policy debate about optimal tax rates and allowances. This is about people's lives, food security and the future of our countryside and the natural environment. It will not be wealthy landowners who suffer under the Government's new family farm tax; it will be farming families barely able to make a living and, sadly, those who are left behind when a farmer dies unexpectedly, and who do not have access to clever accountants or special consultants. Not only will they have to deal with the emotional trauma of losing a parent or a partner; they may be at risk of losing the farm—their home.

The Government must abolish this family farm tax or, at the very least, raise the threshold to limit its impact on those who should not have to and cannot afford to bear the brunt. The Government must look closely at loopholes that allow wealthy landowners who are not farmers to use land as an inheritance tax loophole.

Agriculture is the most dangerous in industry in Britain. When we talk about farmers, many will assume that we are talking about males, but many women work in agriculture, and they are 10% more likely to suffer with depression and 15% more likely to suffer with anxiety. Women make up 55% of the farming workforce in England and Wales, so there is an urgent need for targeted interventions, particularly at key points in their lives, when they are most vulnerable to mental ill health, such as during extreme weather or disease outbreaks.

This family farm tax is another example of gender stereotypes and outdated assumptions about modern farming. Modern family farms are not always run by traditional families, so many will not be able to take advantage of the extra relief. The Government's claim that 75% of farms will be unaffected relies on the assumption that every farmer is married and will benefit from twice the basic allowance.

9.14 pm

**John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con):** Late in 1745, Dumfries was menaced by the Young Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie, who demanded cash and shoes as he retreated north. Today, Dumfries and Galloway is threatened by the great pretenders, the Cabinet, who also want cash. Apparently, they are sorted for shoes and Croydon wellies, though.

At the weekend, I attended the Dumfries and Galloway life awards, a tremendous celebration of the people of south-west Scotland. They are self-starters and hard workers, and just as well, for they face not only indifference

[John Cooper]

from the Scottish Government but active harm from this Government. I spoke with one award winner, Kerr, whose expansion plans for his food business face a pause as he weighs the impact of increased employer national insurance contributions. I spoke with a farmer whose best hope of avoiding the Chancellor's predatory death taxes is for his parents to live a further seven years—they are both aged over 80.

Rural Dumfries and Galloway does not want special treatment; it wants its fair share. It wants an acknowledgement that its way of life—with an emphasis on aspiration—is not wrong, though it does pose particular challenges. It wants an Agriculture Secretary who does not devolve and forget, but who sees some of Britain's most productive grassland as a jewel in the crown and a vital part of UK food security. It wants a Government who appreciate that if someone in a town or city has £10 in their pocket, they will be able to do something with it, whereas in remote and rural Britain, that tenner probably will not get them to the farm road end.

Rural Britain is a greenhouse, bringing forth a rich harvest of food to our tables, but it could be more. It could be a powerhouse if the urban-obsessed party on the Government Benches stops treating it merely as a larder to be plundered. Bonnie Prince Charlie took those stolen shoes and trudged off to defeat. Perhaps Dumfries can seek reparations via the supine Foreign Secretary. Regardless, this Prime Minister and his Cabinet are limping towards their own electoral Culloden.

9.16 pm

**Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Agriculture and farming play a very important part in Welsh society, not just economically but culturally and socially. Farming families are custodians of the landscape and language in Wales, with a high proportion of them living and working in the Welsh-speaking heartlands. Agriculture is devolved, but trade deals are not, and neither are taxation and food security. Agriculture is integral to the Welsh economy, employing around 58,000 people. As the climate crisis leads to more food insecurity, supporting our farmers will be key to our future food security.

Despite the importance of farming and agriculture in Wales, this Labour Government have sought to undermine our farmers with the changes announced in the recent Budget. An effective 20% tax rate on assets over £1 million may seem reasonable on paper, but as we know, most farmers are asset rich and cash poor and would be unable to pay this tax. As I mentioned last week, the average wage for an upland farmer in Wales is £18,600.

About 30% of land in Wales is under some form of tenancy or let, with the majority being short term—of only a few years—under a farm business tenancy agreement. What is the Secretary of State doing to protect tenant farmers in Wales, who will be at the sharp end of this tax? The news regarding the changes in inheritance tax will be devastating to farmers, and the Government's communication of it to the sector has been abysmal.

The election of Donald Trump in the USA has reopened speculation of a US-UK trade deal. The trade deal agreements we have had with Australia and New Zealand have undermined Welsh farmers with cheap

imports, and we must not allow that to happen again. All Parliaments of the UK, including in Wales, should have a deciding say on any terms of a trade deal with America, particularly those that affect Welsh farmers. For example, the previous UK Government consulted to make the country of origin clearer on food labelling, so that customers could more easily buy British produce and support local farmers. Will the Secretary of State say what progress the new Government are making in that area, and will he consider going further by ensuring that "Welsh" and not just "British" labelling is included to help customers who wish to support Welsh farmers when they are shopping?

9.20 pm

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): As an MP in a largely rural Cambridgeshire constituency, the potential impact of the changes to both agricultural and business property relief stand to have a devastating effect on the livelihoods of our family farms. I struggle to believe that newly minted rural Labour MPs, or indeed Cambridge's own farming Minister, are experiencing full-throated support for this policy. We are yet to see Government Members take a stance against this policy on behalf of their constituents. They must be receiving the same angry and worried emails that we are, yet the few who actually come to the Chamber to speak in these debates genuflect before the Government's anti-farming policy, while hundreds of others hide themselves away.

From my local perspective, I can only assume that farmers across the constituency boundary in Labour North West Cambridgeshire simply will not be impacted. Except they will be: there are 203 farm holdings, with a further 306 in Huntingdon and 688 across Huntingdonshire. Guy is an arable farmer in Warboys, right on the constituency boundary with North West Cambridgeshire. His is a 600-acre arable farm producing wheat, barley, beans and sugar beet. Under the Government's changes to APR and BPR, if Guy were to pass away before passing the farm to his children, the whole business would face a 20% tax bill, equal to £1.2 million, or £120,000 a year over 10 years. That is the entire surplus generated by the farm before any wages are drawn. The only way to fund such a bill would be to sell the land—over 20% of the farm. Once that land is gone, it is gone.

As the Prime Minister himself stated at the 2023 NFU conference:

"losing a farm is not like losing any other business—it can't come back".

That land will end up being sold through necessity to developers for houses or for solar farms, both of which, conveniently, are political priorities for this Government. Farming clearly is not.

Next week, thousands of farmers will be here in Westminster lobbying us, their representatives in this House, to tell us of the impact this policy will have on their livelihoods. The fact that the NFU has been forced into taking these steps—after unproductive discussions with the Secretary of State, whom many will feel they can no longer trust after his pledge that the Government had no plans to make changes to APR turned out to be a falsehood—is a damning indictment of Labour's commitment to farmers. The Prime Minister claimed that this Labour Government:

“seeks a new relationship with the countryside and farming communities...A relationship based on respect and on genuine partnership.”

Whether it be in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire or any of our rural heartlands, the Prime Minister is not delivering on that promise. The Prime Minister’s “new relationship” has quickly soured into a toxic one.

I hope that Labour MPs will be brave enough not only to face their constituents when they come to Westminster next week, but to lobby the Chancellor and the Secretary of State to ensure that our family farms are not taxed out of existence.

9.22 pm

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): I am proud to represent the Bridgwater constituency, which has both urban and rural communities. It is plain to see that those living in the countryside do not enjoy the same quality of service as those living in town.

One of the greatest differences is in broadband and mobile signals. In today’s economy, access to fast, reliable internet is essential for any business, whether to receive orders or to complete VAT returns. When I questioned the Minister last month about funding for the shared rural network, he confirmed that the new Government will continue the plans of the Conservative Administration to extend access to rural communities. Since then, we have had disappointing news. Connecting Devon and Somerset, along with its partner Airband, is scaling back plans to provide fibre optic broadband to rural areas in my constituency and in others in Somerset. I have requested a meeting with the Minister on this matter, as it is of critical importance. If we are to ensure the prosperity of rural areas, investment in rural broadband and 5G must be a national priority.

Another issue that disproportionately affects our rural communities is flooding, which particularly affects our farmers. When farms flood, as they often do in Somerset, the damage to crops, infrastructure and livestock can be devastating. The Government need to improve how statutory bodies work together. Joining up their efforts would help us to predict floods better and prevent agencies from being overwhelmed when multiple flooding events occur. The Government should take a more proactive role in supporting farmers with better flood prevention measures, and ensure that compensation, when provided, is fair, accessible and timely.

The challenges of food security require us to invest in local agriculture and ensure that our farmers are thriving in an environment that values sustainable, reliable food production. The Government’s increase in inheritance tax for farmers will harm food production in our country. It is a poorly conceived attack on family farms, many of which are high in value—land, buildings and machinery—but produce a low return. Families who work hard to feed the nation should not be taxed out of existence by the Chancellor, but Labour’s family farm tax will make it impossible for many farmers to pass on their land to their children.

If I had had enough time, I would have addressed rural bus services—or the lack thereof—rural housing, especially for young families, and the provision of small rural schools. However, I will end by saying that with better policies for food security and farming, Britain can have a strong and vibrant countryside.

9.25 pm

**Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): In my constituency and across the country, family farmers are the custodians of our countryside. For generations, they have contributed to our nation’s food security and land stewardship, provided employment, supported local supply chains, and brought rural communities together. The changes to agricultural property relief—this family farm tax—is the wrong tax aimed at the wrong targets. As we have heard many times, farms, while asset rich, are cash poor. Most farmers do not have hundreds of thousands of pounds of cash available to pay an inheritance tax bill, so they will have to sell the very assets that they use to farm to raise capital.

**The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs** (**Daniel Zeichner**) *indicated dissent*.

**Harriet Cross:** The Minister shakes his head, and he has been shaking his head throughout the debate. The issue is this: the Government are not listening to farmers the length and breadth of the country. They are not listening to the National Farmers Union, and they are not listening to the CLA. People who speak for the farming community, people who represent the farming community, are not being listened to, and that is why they are in this position. It does not matter, it seems, how much we say to the Minister, or how much we say what our constituents are saying. The Government are not listening, and they are not willing to listen.

Last Friday, I met members of NFU Scotland’s north-east region. Perhaps the Minister will not listen to this either, but they told me about some matters that they had been concerned about. One was a farmer whose father, aged 90, still owns the land and still farms it. He said to me, “I will have to sell. I thought I had a lifetime of farming ahead of me, but now it turns out that I only have what is left of my father’s lifetime.” He did not sound angry; he just sounded broken. Another put it like this: “It is just a waste. Do they”—the Government—“not understand the resource that we have invested into family farms for generations—the skills, health and safety, teaching about husbandry and agronomy? We invest so much more than just money into farms, and this will all be lost. It is just such a waste.”

In their manifesto the Government said that “food security is national security.”

They reiterated that last week, adding:

“The Government’s commitment to supporting farmers and rural communities is unwavering.”—[*Official Report*, 4 November 2024; Vol. 756, c. 23.]

However, in the few months since the election, the Government have done nothing to justify those claims. Granting solar farms on prime land, taxing fertiliser, removing the ringfence from the agricultural budgets for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and making changes to inheritance tax will impact family farms for generations. The Government have missed a key point: it is not words that impress or satisfy our farming communities; it is action, and so far this Government’s actions have let our farmers down.

9.28 pm

**Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): On Armistice Day, I want to mention the vital role that our farmers played during the world wars to keep food on



[Saqib Bhatti]

the table, as they continue to do. If I had more time, I would spend it championing the farmers in my own constituency, not least because it is the home of Berkswell cheese. I would welcome any Member who would like to try it, and they might also like to try some of the turkeys from Rod Adlington's farm. However, I will focus on APR and BPR. I thought that the right hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), the shadow Secretary of State, did a wonderful job of deconstructing the Government's arguments in that regard, despite Ministers' desire to hide their heads in the sand.

We are seeing a travesty unfold in front of us. We are seeing the travesty of the Secretary of State saying that farmers need to do more with less, and the Government's sheer brass neck in not listening, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross). Our farmers are working people. They put food on our table and are responsible for our food security, but the Budget puts our family farms on notice. In my constituency and those across the country, family farms ensure that we have food on our tables. They do not do so at a profit, even if they have assets that they will now be taxed on.

I spent some time wondering why the policy was introduced, and it is clear that it is a cynical ploy to free up land so that the Deputy Prime Minister can concrete over our green belt and the Energy Secretary—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members can shout me down if they want—that is fine—but farmers are listening and can see the arrogance of those on the Government Benches. The Energy Secretary's desire is to have pylons and solar panels peppered across our green belt. The Government broke their promises on NI, they broke their promises to pensioners, and now they are breaking their promises to our farmers.

Some clarity is needed, because the Chancellor has repeatedly said that the thresholds will be shared between spouses. That was contradicted by the Treasury, and the Secretary of State said something else at the Dispatch Box. Farmers need clarity, because how can they possibly plan if the Chancellor and the Secretary of State do not know their own policies and are contradicting each other?

The Government continue to say that the policy will not affect that many farmers, but DEFRA's own analysis shows that it will affect 66% of them. The Secretary of State said he was using the Treasury's figures. Why do two Departments' figures contradict each other? We need clarity on that, because it is important. [*Interruption.*] Labour Members can shout me down, but it is really important for the livelihoods of so many people.

When it comes to undermining our food security and national security, the only winners are autocrats around the world who would like to see us weakened—autocrats like Vladimir Putin. That is exactly what the policy will lead to.

9.31 pm

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): We all want growth, but growth requires investment. Investment requires confidence, but confidence among rural communities is collapsing, including in Boston and Skegness. Since the Budget, one farmer has cancelled

a £1 million expansion plan for his strawberry-growing business. I know another farmer who has cancelled a £300,000 investment in equipment. Just yesterday, I heard from a hospitality entrepreneur in my constituency who has cancelled another investment in a new pub. It means less growth, fewer jobs and less incentive for young people to stay in our rural communities. That is the reality.

Confidence in the Environment Agency is also collapsing. Just yesterday afternoon, I was on the riverbank at Wainfleet and saw the consequences of failed management, the failure to dredge our rivers and the failure to protect our riverbanks. Again, it means that local farmers and entrepreneurs will not have the confidence to invest. Confidence is such a critical word, but confidence in this Government is collapsing in rural communities. It seems the Government want to blight our countryside, including in my constituency, with thousands of ugly pylons and thousands of acres of solar farms. That will not provide food security.

The Government are determined to set course on this ridiculous farm tax, but I urge them to have the humility to listen and to look at the results. If investment is down, jobs are down and family farms are down in one or two years' time, they should accept that they were wrong and reverse it.

9.33 pm

**Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Over 52,000 hectares of the land in South Northamptonshire is agricultural—equivalent to more than 35,000 football pitches—so rural issues are at the heart of my constituency. I will focus on three matters: the death of the family farm, flooding and solar farms.

The Chancellor's agricultural property relief reforms have caused huge distress among the farming community in South Northamptonshire. Last week, I joined fellow Opposition MPs to deliver a letter to Downing Street urging her to rethink this disastrous policy. However, we must not forget the other pernicious elements of the Budget. Increasing tax on fertilisers—the carbon tax—to meet net zero targets will force farmers to produce less food. We will therefore have to import it from a country that does not have such a tax, with all the resulting carbon impact. It is unbelievably counterintuitive. The Government will also now class double-cab pick-ups—the workhorse vehicle of the countryside—as company cars for tax purposes. This change could increase the tax burden on the working people of the countryside by 211%. I am staggered that Labour can say that food security is national security while introducing a smorgasbord of attacks on farmers.

Members may also be aware that in September parts of Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire suffered catastrophic flooding. The village of Grendon in my constituency was flooded in a matter of minutes at 9 o'clock on a Sunday evening, resulting in the entire downstairs floors of some properties being ruined, cars being destroyed and priceless memories being lost. Residents believe this may have occurred due to insufficient dredging of a nearby brook, such that when the heavy rainfall occurred upstream, the water built up like a dam that burst and wreaked havoc. Will the Secretary of State and the Minister commit to exploring how extensively the Environment Agency dredges small brooks, to prevent such catastrophes from recurring?

On solar farms, Easton Maudit in my constituency would be enveloped on three sides by the proposed 2,000-acre Green Hill solar farm, with once-beautiful English countryside reduced to grey sheets of plastic and glass. I am not against more renewable energy, but to have a solar farm on such a scale totally enveloping an idyllic rural village, while warehouses on the M1 sit without solar panels on their roofs, seems totally illogical to me and my constituents. Our rural towns and villages may be smaller in size and less visible than our urban cities, but their residents are just as important and we must protect them.

9.36 pm

**Dr Roz Savage** (South Cotswolds) (LD): The gravity of this situation was brought home to me by a letter that I received recently from a South Cotswolds constituent, a farmer near Sherston whose experience vividly illustrates the challenge our agricultural sector faces. He manages a 200-acre farm, a combination of owned and rented primarily arable land, with a small field of Brussels sprouts, where I spent a day helping with the harvest last Christmas. I am no farmer, but that day spent in the mud and drizzle gave me some inkling of just how hard our farmers work and how dedicated they are. Despite their best efforts, their financial reality is stark. Last year, with an above-average harvest and a favourable crop price, they made just £34,000 before even paying themselves anything. This year, with falling crop prices, they anticipate a loss.

The recent Budget proposals have cast a long shadow over our farming communities, adding to an already vulnerable situation. The changes to agricultural property relief threaten to force the sale of farms that have been in the same family for generations. That Brussels sprouts farmer faces a potential inheritance tax bill of nearly £239,000, a sum that could be paid only by selling off part of the farm that has been in his family for three generations.

The Liberal Democrats have long recognised that food security is national security. We understand that environmental stewardship and food production are not mutually exclusive, but mutually reinforcing goals. It is in line with this that I have introduced my private Member's Bill, the Climate and Nature Bill, which would help to support farmers, to support nature and to support us. Our farmers are not just food producers: they are the guardians of our land, regenerating soil, restoring wildlife and enhancing biodiversity.

Many people think that the climate crisis is the cause of the nature crisis, but many believe—rightly, I think—that it is the loss of nature that is contributing to the climate crisis. The Royal Agricultural University in Cirencester, in the South Cotswolds, is now starting to pioneer the idea of zero dig, knowing that when we regenerate soil it sinks more carbon, mitigating climate change; it holds more water, mitigating flooding; and it yields more nutritious food, improving human health.

I call on the Secretary of State to heed the voices of our farmers. We need to work together to create a future in which British agriculture is strong, resilient and sustainable—a future where our farmers can produce the food we need while nurturing the land we love.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the shadow Minister.

9.39 pm

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Rural communities are proud communities, and our farmers work tirelessly around the clock not only to put high-quality food on our plates but, through their businesses, to help to keep our rural economy going—as, indeed, do many other rural businesses, as Members on both sides of the House have recognised.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) and for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) on delivering their maiden speeches. I know Stirling and Strathallan very well, having been born in Stirling—I am a proper Unionist—which gave me my red hair. Each spoke proudly on behalf of their constituents, and I welcome them to this place.

We are just a few months into this Labour Government and, following a string of broken promises and damaging cuts, trust among our farming community is now at an all-time low. Why are this new Government, across every single Department, deciding to sideline the voice of our rural communities?

We have heard that the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero is ploughing ahead with his plans to replace productive agricultural land with solar panels, and to replace protected moorlands with wind turbines—all against the consent of local people. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is taking away from local people the power to decide how they would like to see their rural communities expand, while providing no commitment whatsoever to improve services and infrastructure alongside any increased demand. The Secretary of State for Transport is scrapping the £2 bus cap, which the previous Government introduced as a vital part of the rural transport plan. Labour's change leaves many people in remote rural communities paying even more to get to work or to visit friends and loved ones.

The Chancellor is stifling rural growth by hiking national insurance for small business owners, who are the backbone of our rural community, alongside her disastrous changes to inheritance tax relief through the ill-thought-through cap on agricultural property relief and business property relief, which will affect not only multigenerational family farms but trading businesses with assets valued well over the Government's ridiculous £1 million cap. The Chancellor is also taxing double-cab pick-up trucks, as well as increasing the fertiliser tax, which is expected to increase costs by up to £50 a tonne.

Then, of course, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has willingly sold off his own budget to the Chancellor and broken every pre-election promise that he and his Government made to farmers, and then had the cheek to tell them to do more with less. That is all while he is dramatically reducing the delinked payment rates, which take effect next year, despite many farming businesses already having factored the income into their cash-flow forecasts. It is quite simple: this Labour Government do not understand rural communities and, what is worse, do not even appear to want to listen to them.

**Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me and David Walston from Thriplow in South Cambridgeshire that the impact

[Pippa Heylings]

of house prices and infrastructure means there is a complete disconnect between land value and income, which is affecting—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order.

**Robbie Moore:** I know David well, as a fellow Nuffield farming scholar, and I agree with him on this Budget's catastrophic consequences.

I am not sure how many farmers the Secretary of State spoke to in Croydon over the weekend, but I can tell him that the many farmers I spoke to are up in arms. Just last week I was at the northern farming conference in Hexham where, perhaps unsurprisingly, a huge number of complaints were raised by the farmers in attendance, with some even protesting at the gates. Ian Brown, a constituent of the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), said that this Budget will have catastrophic consequences for the farming community, yet all we heard from the Minister during that conference was a defence of the new Government, and not a single word about how they may have got it wrong. I understand that when he addressed the egg and poultry conference this morning, the Secretary of State concluded that farmers are exaggerating the consequences of the Budget. It is just staggering.

I am sure that many of the new Labour MPs, representing some of our fantastic rural constituencies, have received huge amounts of correspondence from farmers outlining their disgust at Labour's Budget, but we heard very little from them in voicing their concerns. I am not sure whether the Whips are silencing them from raising their concerns, or whether they are completely tone deaf to the Budget's direct impact on many of their constituents. If they would like some help, maybe I could outline some of the things they should be raising in this debate, such as increases in taxes on machinery, fertiliser, building materials, farm diversification and employees, and, worst of all, the crippling family farm tax, which risks forcing thousands of hard-working farmers to surrender their life's work to the Chancellor.

Labour Members do not understand that the vast majority of family farmers are not multimillionaires; most are cash poor and operate under tiny margins, with many struggling to break even. To sustain their businesses, they generally operate from an asset base that has a high value. That is why the APR and BPR caps that have been imposed are so out of touch with the reality on the ground, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) rightly outlined. When the value of the farmland, the farmhouse and perhaps a cottage or two is taken into account, and then the value of any livestock, growing crops, machinery, stocks or crops in store is added, along with the value of any farm diversification project that may have taken place, the value of any asset is likely to be well in excess of the £1 million cap, so the tax will impact the vast majority of farming businesses.

The Minister will say, "Look at the detail", but I assure him we have looked at the detail, as have the NFU, the CLA, the Tenant Farmers Association, the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers, and many professionals, be they accountants, solicitors or land agents working in the sector, as well as many of the

constituents of right hon. and hon. Members on the Conservative Benches. We have all come to the same conclusion: Labour's positioning is wrong, will have catastrophic consequences and must change. I again ask the Minister to provide clarity on the information he is relying on to make these decisions.

The smokescreen of a £3 million cap is incompatible with many farming businesses. It will not provide many farming businesses or family farming set-ups with the reassurance the Chancellor claims to be giving them. The same can be said about the justification of the 10-year payment for any IHT debt. That debt would result in assets having to be disposed of, because businesses will simply not have the funds to pay, nor will the banks be willing to lend against any IHT tax, should it be imposed, because many farmers will not be able to service such a loan. Will the Government publish a full impact assessment of the consequences their Budget will have on many farming businesses, food security and the larger rural sector?

We should never forget that this debate is about people. Hard-working farmers are at the heart of the debate. Some of their lives will be changed for ever. Farming can be a very lonely business, with long hours and the constant stress of battling against the odds. Our farmers are under extreme pressure, but unfortunately this Budget has done nothing to provide them with any reassurance, support or certainty that the Government are on their side. It is no surprise that charities are raising concerns about the shocking rise in mental health issues among our farming communities following the announcements in the Government's Budget. I pay tribute to those farming charities and organisation that help to provide much-needed support, not only to our farmers but to all those involved in our remote rural communities.

To sum up, sometimes in politics it is hard to admit to being wrong, but after speaking to farmers, agricultural businesses and farming organisations up and down the UK, it is clear that the Government have got this wrong and are completely off the mark. I suspect even the Ministers on the Treasury Bench know that they have got this wrong, but they have chosen to double down. For the sake of our farmers and our rural communities—in fact, everyone who has been impacted by the Budget—I say to the Government that change was one of Labour's key promises in the election and, right now, nothing would be more welcome.

9.50 pm

**The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner):** It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to wind up this debate and to add my gratitude to, and support for, farmers working hard up and down the country to feed the nation and protect our environment.

I welcome the shadow Ministers to their places on the Opposition Front Bench. I spent nearly five years sitting there, and I have to say it is better on this side. During that time, how rarely we ever got to discuss rural policy in the Chamber. It is interesting that it has taken a Labour Government to give Government time to allow Members to speak up for rural areas. What brilliant contributions we have had from Labour Members about the things that matter to rural areas. I shall mention some of the excellent speeches.



I was thrilled to hear the three maiden speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) spoke about a range of issues—*[Interruption.]* Of course farming is important, but Conservatives should remember that many other things are going on in rural areas. We heard about those from my hon. Friend, but we also heard about ghastly homophobic bullying, and I pay tribute to him for his brave comments. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) about the extraordinary pedigree in his constituency, as well as the wide range of issues, including film and television production, that help to create rural prosperity.

Closer to my part of the world, my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) described the beautiful countryside, but also talked of the challenges in housing and the food banks that scar our country. How much we should all work to ensure that food poverty is not faced in the future.

I cannot talk about all the speeches today, but I was pleased to hear the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) raising some other issues beyond the one that I will come to in a moment. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) about flooding—a feature of many speeches. We heard a powerful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) about the positive things that the Labour Government are doing to address the real issues that we face.

We also heard from the Chair of the Select Committee, who is not in his place—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry—I missed him. I think he has moved. I always listen closely to his speeches and he made an important point when he said it is not about the figures. That is true, because the figures have been misrepresented, but he was right to say that there is a real fear out there—precisely because of the misrepresentations, not because of the figures.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough), who showed the difference between this side of the House and the other side. The future will be different for rural areas, food production and farming—*[Interruption.]* In a good way, because we are the future, they are the past. Then we went to my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), and we heard about how important it is to work collaboratively with people. We also heard about the important transition from the basic payments system towards the new way of working with and rewarding farmers effectively.

From my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) we heard about crime. It was interesting that it took a Labour Member, so deep into the debate, to talk about an issue that anyone who had actually been out on farms would have heard about—the constant thefts of GPS units. I sometimes wonder what world Conservative Members are living in—do they just read *The Daily Telegraph* all the time? Is that where they get their information?

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) spoke about wonderful national parks and better access to the countryside, which is important for so many people; the Government will deliver on that. My hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) spoke about how prosperity comes to rural areas. Sometimes it comes from filming

and TV. There are many ways in which prosperity is earned in the countryside; this is the future. My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) spoke about rural crime and PC Susan Holliday; I very much commend her for her work. My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) spoke about not just flooding but biosecurity, which is so important, and mental health, which we will come to in the Adjournment debate. I associate myself with the comments of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), about the important work that so many charities are doing.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) spoke about rural homelessness, which is an important topic. I was struck by how negative Opposition Members are about the prospect of building more homes. That is what matters to all our constituents. They need somewhere to live, not just somewhere to rent out to people at extortionate rates. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) reminded the House about the extraordinary low levels of farmer confidence when the last Government were in power. The Conservatives bear some responsibility for that lack of confidence.

I was delighted to visit Hexham last week for the excellent conference. I say to the shadow Minister, it is striking how many people come up to me after each of these events and say, “You’re right. You’re right. You’re right.” Of course, against the huge peer pressure they are reluctant to say it, but they know that we are right. My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) is the first Labour MP for that area. The Conservatives might want to think about why that is. I think it is because they are looking to the past, not the future. We finished by hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger). How long it took in the debate to get to parish councils—the people closest to the ground.

Let me turn to the issue that the Opposition are consistently raising. I hear and understand what people are saying, but I waited in vain through the entire debate for an Opposition Member to address the real figures—the actual claims that have been made under APR. They are not a projection or a guess, but the figures published by the people in the Treasury who actually collect the tax. Those figures are of course the figures that we have been quoting: between 400 and 500 claims per year. With the changes in behaviour that are likely as a consequence of the policy—possibly, and quite likely, very good consequences—the numbers will be very small. That is not just what we have said; Paul Johnson from the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said it.

**Ben Obese-Jecty:** Will the Minister give way?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I will not, because I am afraid we are very close to the end. Opposition Members had four hours to get to the figures, but of course they would not want to engage with them because they tell a different story. We are confident that the policy can be made to work, but I am in discussion with the NFU and others on the figures so that they can understand how we arrived at the policy. We will continue to ensure that we engage properly with everybody. My hon. Friends have discovered that when they go and talk to people and explain it clearly, people are reassured. People should be reassuring rather than frightening.

[Daniel Zeichner]

Members raised issues around the devolved budgets. This year's settlement has been carried forward in the same way as before, but what has changed is that it is no longer ringfenced for the devolved Administrations, so they can make the decisions. I would hope that the devolved Administrations would welcome that.

Let me finish on the positive news about the future that we are setting out for our food production system. I give credit to the previous Government for the agricultural transition that they began. The difference now is that we will turbocharge it and ensure that we transition in such a way that in the future we not only have strong food production in this country, but protect the environment and nature, with the stability of the biggest budget ever—over half a billion pounds for SFI this year. That would not have happened under the previous Government. I am confident that we will have a strong future for British farming in this country, provided that people do not spend the whole time talking it down.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered rural affairs.

## Mental Health: Farming and Agricultural Communities

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(Kate Dearden.)

10 pm

**Aphra Brandreth** (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful to have secured a debate on the vital and pertinent issue of mental health in farming and agricultural communities.

It is sadly no exaggeration to say that we have a mental health crisis in our rural and agricultural communities. In January 2021, the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution launched a large research project called the big farming survey. The audience of the survey was 15,000 farmers, contractors and their households, and its aim was to achieve a better understanding of the health and wellbeing of the farming community in England and Wales. The report found that the farming community has lower than average mental wellbeing compared with the wider UK population. A point of concern is that over a third of those who completed the survey had significantly low mental wellbeing scores. Worryingly, a similar number said that they were probably or possibly depressed, according to NHS thresholds.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and congratulate her on securing this important debate. The Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution's big farming survey also found that 52% of farmers experience regular pain and discomfort, while one in four has mobility problems. Does she agree that we must recognise that physical health has an impact on mental health, and ensure that the NHS, GPs and mental health services are joined up?

**Aphra Brandreth:** The hon. Member, who is an excellent champion for farmers in her community, makes an important point on physical health.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady, to whom I spoke beforehand, on securing the debate. The Ulster Farmers Union runs its "Mind Your Head" campaign every February to bring down the stigma attached to poor mental health in the farming sector. That is so important because research shows that 95% of young farmers in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have concerns about their mental health. Does she feel that this matter should be considered not just in England and Wales, but across this great nation?

**Aphra Brandreth:** The hon. Member makes an important point: this issue impacts every part of our Union. I will refer to the impact on young people later in my speech.

To go back to the RABI survey, the report found that the farming community has lower than average mental wellbeing compared with the wider UK population. A point of concern is that over a third of those who completed the survey had significantly low mental wellbeing scores. Worryingly, a similar number said that they were probably or possibly depressed. Nearly half of respondents said that they were experiencing some form of anxiety. Tragically, one in five respondents knew someone who

had attempted to take their own life. I remind the House that the survey had 15,000 responses, so that is a shockingly high statistic, and I hope that its gravity hits home with Members across the House.

Since the report was launched in January 2021, things have not become any easier for farmers and the rural community. Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine, and its consequences for energy and fertiliser prices, and for the flow of commodities such as grain and oilseeds, have caused farmers a great deal of concern. Economic factors such as inflation have also hit farmers hard, and like several places across the country, we in Cheshire have had a particularly bad year with regard to rainfall. Those problems all compound existing challenges, thereby putting a significant strain on farmers who are already under huge pressure.

**Patrick Spencer** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for giving way. Just last Friday, I visited a farm in my constituency. It is a family farm: David runs the construction side of the business, Robert runs the farm, and their sister Sharon runs the books. By any measure, it is a successful farm. That family has owned the property for a long period of time, but when they spoke to me, they talked—as my hon. Friend has said—about high energy costs, high interest rates, tougher international competition, tougher regulations on pesticides and the use of chemicals, and a volatile climate. Then, to raise the issue that was the subject of our last debate, they talked about the new rules on inheritance tax. Is it any surprise that many people in the farming industry feel stressed and under pressure, considering the policies introduced by this Government?

**Aphra Brandreth**: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. The sector faces a wide range of challenges, and of course, the decisions that the Government are making will contribute in part to some of those challenges. Some are outside the control of all of us, the weather being one example.

I represent Chester South and Eddisbury, a constituency with a large rural area. Because of the nature of Cheshire's ground and topography, dairy is the predominant mode of farming locally. That brings additional challenges through the risks of animal disease outbreaks, and their financial and emotional consequences.

I would like to take a moment to share some of the very real stories that demonstrate why I have asked for today's debate, because behind every statistic is a personal story. There are families, loved ones, friends and communities who are deeply affected. Those of us who represent rural and agricultural communities know that the suicide rate among farmers is tragically high. Sadly, even in the short time that I have had the privilege of representing Chester South and Eddisbury, I have had examples in my constituency that have caused a great deal of pain to the families and the surrounding area. When something like this happens, it rocks a tight-knit community to its core, and the impact is felt by many.

Only last week, I heard of a tragic incident where a daughter found her father after he had taken his own life in one of the barns on their family farm. In a tribute, the daughter wrote of how her father worked so incredibly hard, and how proud he was to have increased the acreage and yield of the family farm during his

stewardship. He was immensely proud of the operation he had built. His daughter summed up the vocation of farming in her online tribute:

"Farmers work harder and longer than most other trades and earn significantly less. We love what we do, or we wouldn't do it. We feed the nation to the best of our abilities".

I cannot begin to imagine what the families of those two farmers are going through, but as I said earlier, such cases are too common. Members from right across the House will have heard other stories like these in their own constituencies.

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and for securing this important debate. On the vital issue of the tragedy of suicides among the farming community, I have met several farmers in my constituency who have felt that pressure—the common theme is that everybody knows somebody who has felt that pressure at some point, or sadly has even taken their own life. Does the hon. Lady agree that right across the House, we should agree to support farmers in whatever way we can?

**Aphra Brandreth**: I appreciate the hon. Member's comments, and I am sorry to hear about the tragic instances in his constituency. We very much need to be collaborative to improve things for the farming community.

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate. Will she join me in paying tribute to farmer-initiated and farmer-led organisations, such as We are Farming Minds in my constituency? They do such important work to support their colleagues in the farming sector and to tackle mental health challenges head-on.

**Aphra Brandreth**: I am grateful to the hon. Member for mentioning those excellent organisations; I will note others later in my speech.

For all those reasons, this debate and the actions and commitments from the Minister are important. Women are an often overlooked group when we talk about rural mental health, particularly young women. There are inspiring examples of women who run farms and contribute a great deal to the agricultural sector. Of course, women are almost always involved in a farming operation, even if they are not always hands-on in the yard or fields.

**Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. When I visited Pierrepont farm in my constituency, which has just been taken over by a new young female farmer, she talked about the stresses and problems that she is facing. They do not just affect young women, however, but families too; Mathias & Son Nurseries in my constituency equally has those problems. The issue that my hon. Friend is talking about affects established family farms and the new younger generation, and the policies of the new Government are hitting both equally. Does she agree that we need to look after the new young female farmers as well as our established family farms?

**Aphra Brandreth**: Absolutely; we know that mental health issues have an impact on people across the community. It is not just the individual who is directly affected, but those around that person.



[Aphra Brandreth]

The RABI survey found that women aged 24 to 35 had the worst mental health scores across the sample, so I ask the Minister to think about how policy can address that and how we can raise awareness of the mental health challenges facing all those in farming and rural communities.

I stress that there are some wonderful organisations, locally and nationally, that work hard to support our rural and agricultural communities and to provide support for mental wellbeing. I mention again the RABI and the role it plays in supporting farmers, and others such as the Farming Community Network and the Yellow Wellies' "Mind Your Head" project, which help farmers when they need it most.

Those organisations, as good as they are, are not the long-term solution, nor can they find and prevent every tragic occurrence and consequence of suicide in the rural community. Any good doctor would say that prevention is better than cure. The cause of a significant amount of stress for farmers, particularly recently, has been Government policy.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I have just got off the telephone to a constituent from Yarcombe in Devon, who is a tenant farmer and is particularly anxious about agricultural property relief and the Government's proposed inheritance tax changes. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is an appalling proposition?

**Aphra Brandreth**: I thank the hon. Member for sharing that. The impact of APR will be felt across the community. Unfortunately, in a community that is struggling with mental health, it is an extra blow.

Later, I will offer some thoughts on how we might better prevent mental health problems, but I will briefly mention a few other reasons why mental health issues are disproportionately higher in rural areas. First, there is the issue of isolation, which is multifaceted. It can be attributed to literal isolation, because farmers live in sparsely populated areas far from the nearest village; digital isolation, as they are without broadband or mobile coverage; and physical isolation from a lack of transport links. That issue keenly felt in my constituency, where many rural areas have little or no public transport connections.

A mixture of those forms of isolation means that people in rural areas, such as farmers, often suffer from loneliness. It is not easy for people to go to the local pub or café to talk to friends and neighbours when they live in the countryside. It is harder to get to those places, and harder to make time to socialise due to the demands of farming.

There is also the issue of rural reticence. There has historically been a stigma surrounding mental health; sadly, although we have made good progress in breaking down barriers and encouraging people to talk, there remains a reticence in rural and agricultural communities to talk about problems or feelings. It is not because of hubris or arrogance. Rather, the "I'll manage myself" culture comes from a desire not to burden neighbours and friends who are also in the community, and will no doubt be facing the same challenges. I am confident

that we can do more as a society to break down this barrier and encourage farmers to talk honestly and openly with one another.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend personifies the Conservative commitment to farms and farming, and she does so with style and acumen. The fear that she has described is exacerbated by the way farmers now face their customers: supermarkets are ruthless in how they deal with farmers. It is the fear that dare not speak its name; our farmers cannot speak, for those are the people to whom they sell their goods. Will my hon. Friend implore the Government to take a tougher line on the sharp practice of the big retailers in the light of its effect on farmers?

**Aphra Brandreth**: My right hon. Friend always makes such pertinent points. I know the importance he places on issues surrounding food security: he works extremely hard to highlight the challenges that farmers face all around them, and to ensure that they get a fair price from suppliers.

Mental health problems are also more prevalent in agricultural communities because of the volatility of farming. Farmers do not enjoy the luxury of stability and are vulnerable to shocks such as adverse weather and flooding, health issues within herds, such as bovine tuberculosis, and economic problems. Agricultural policy ought to create stability for farmers, not more uncertainty. I will speak more about that issue shortly.

There are many reasons why rural mental health is disproportionately worse, but I hope that the three I have mentioned give the House an idea of why I secured this debate. I have three asks of the Government; I hope that the Minister will be receptive and will commit to working alongside colleagues across the House and within Government to make real progress.

My first request is that the Government take an integrated approach. I humbly suggest to the Minister that that has been an issue with recent Government policy, particularly in relation to agricultural property relief. Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs should have been in the room when the decision was made to change APR. If they were in the room, their priority and their plea to the Treasury should have been the impact on family farms, food security and the local economy.

DEFRA Ministers should also be involved in many cross-governmental discussions. We need a joined-up approach whereby farmers and the rural community are consistently represented by Ministers who have their best interests at heart. Only then can we hope to see a policy that does not cause the agricultural community more concern, leading to further uncertainty and exacerbating the challenges. The decision on APR has once again brought rural mental health to the forefront. We have seen too many tragic stories in the papers. I hope that this is a wake-up call to the Government to start taking rural policy seriously, and not see farmers as a community to exploit.

My second ask of the Minister is that a specific strategy be put in place for young people who live in rural communities. Statistics show a significant uptick in mental health problems among young people, particularly after the pandemic, but many of the problems that I have outlined as compounding factors making rural

mental health worse are even more prominent among younger people. Research conducted by Yellow Wellies shows that 95% of farmers under 40 believe that mental health is the biggest hidden problem facing farmers today. That is a shockingly high statistic.

We know that there is a shortage of young people entering the agricultural sector. That shortage is very often driven by the isolation of rural areas and by the lack of opportunity. If we want the countryside to thrive and farming to be a successful and attractive sector, we must do more to support young people. An important part of that is making sure that their mental health is in as good a place as it can be, so I ask the Minister to reassure the House that this will be a priority for him, and to meet me and representatives from the Cheshire Young Farmers' Clubs to discuss how the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs can better understand the mental health pressures on young people in rural areas.

My final ask is that we make sure that farmers are at the centre of policy decisions that relate to rural areas and the agricultural sector. The ask is simple but very necessary. When the Government are formulating policy, I urge them to think of its implications and consequences. I ask them to think about the motivations behind the policy, and to remind themselves of the motivations behind our farmers' work. They are motivated by service to our country, by providing food and caring for our countryside, and by being part of their local community, supporting friends and family, and working to support the local economy.

Farmers are part of the fabric of our country, the backbone of local economies and stalwarts in our communities. When Ministers feed into policy, I ask that they remember that and reflect the values of the rural and agricultural communities. If Ministers do that, we can go a long way towards improving mental health in areas where that is so desperately needed.

10.20 pm

**The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner):** I thank the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) for introducing this very serious debate in such a calm and measured way befitting the seriousness of the subject. Let me start by extending my sincere condolences to all those who in recent times have lost loved ones, and to their friends, families and communities. Every suicide is a tragedy that has a devastating and enduring impact on families and friends. I absolutely recognise that farmers face challenges on many fronts, and we will do everything we can to safeguard the mental health of people working in the sector.

In recent years there has been a growing awareness of the importance of mental health in the sector, which I absolutely welcome; I agree with the hon. Lady's comments about the impact on women, and we will continue to work with the full range of farming charities. I particularly echo her comments about amazing organisations such as the Farming Community Network and the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, and I very much recognise the points about the survey; indeed, the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) and I were on a panel discussing this very issue with Yellow Wellies last year. We are supporting the mental health and wellbeing of our farmers, and in the coming

weeks I will invite charities and other stakeholders with expertise in this area to discuss how we can grow a better national support system for farmers.

I do not have much time, so I will not go into a whole range of detail, but extreme weather events, such as floods, and the pressure of disease clearly put additional stress on people; we fully appreciate that. We will continue to seek out opportunities to support people. Today I have agreed to continue the funding for the Farming Community Network, which supports communities affected by bovine tuberculosis; we are putting in place a three-year contract, starting on 1 December. That support began back in 2009, and it provides TB-affected farmers and their families with a national, free-to-access business and pastoral advice service. It has been successful, and we are very pleased to continue it.

Furthermore, we continue to provide funding for several organisations that will deliver projects to address these issues. The Farming Community Network, Lincolnshire Rural Support Network, the Farmer Network and You Are Not Alone are all in receipt of funding this year, and we will continue to work with third-sector organisations to keep delivering support into the future.

On suicide prevention, we are working across government to improve mental health and access to services. I pay tribute to everyone who is working to raise awareness, and I encourage those who are struggling to reach out for help. We recognise the points about isolation and difficulty in asking for help, so we are giving mental health the same attention and focus as physical health. We want everyone to be confident about accessing high-quality mental health support when they need it. I am pleased that we have announced that we will recruit 8,500 new mental health workers, who will be trained to support people at risk of suicide. The £10 million suicide prevention grant fund, which runs until March 2025, continues to provide funding to a range of voluntary and community organisations to support their work on suicide prevention.

The hon. Lady made good points about loneliness and isolation. Suicide is a complex, multifaceted issue, and loneliness and isolation are particular risk factors for people in rural areas, such as farmers and agricultural workers. We are committed to tackling loneliness, including by providing advice on loneliness as part of the "Better Health—Every Mind Matters" campaign. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport also supports organisations that can play a role in reducing loneliness stigma among men in particular, through the Tackling Loneliness Hub. That online platform connects professionals from across sectors working to reduce loneliness. I conclude by thanking the hon. Lady for bringing this important subject to the attention of the House.

**Aphra Brandreth:** I appreciate the Minister's constructive comments, and some of the policies he mentioned that he put in place. As I noted, I want to raise the importance of the impact on young people in the farming industry, so will he meet me and Cheshire Young Farmers' Clubs, so that young farmers can hear at first hand from the Minister and put questions to him on this issue?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I welcome the hon. Lady's commitment to supporting young people. It is certainly one of my passions to ensure that we transform the system to make it easier for young people to come into farming

[Daniel Zeichner]

and prosper. I am on a perpetual tour of the country, and I am sure that I can find a time and opportunity to meet her and her young people. I look forward to doing so.

In conclusion, the Government are committed to supporting farmers and agricultural workers in accessing the support that they need to protect their mental health and wellbeing. We will work to tackle loneliness and

isolation in rural areas. We will ensure provision of high-quality, accessible mental health support. We are determined to support farmers as they do the vital work of producing food and looking after nature and the environment.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.27 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Written Statement

Monday 11 November 2024

## ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

### COP29: Priorities

**The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband):** We are halfway through the critical decade for tackling climate change, but the world is off-track from limiting global warming to 1.5°C. We are facing a triple planetary crisis of climate, biodiversity loss and pollution posing critical threats to the UK's national interests across security, resilience, health, the economy and partnerships with other countries.

With global temperatures continuing to rise, the impacts of the climate and nature crises—storms, floods, droughts, food and water insecurity, displaced communities—will be a profound source of global disorder. To engage only with the effects of climate change, war, poverty, pandemics or irregular migration when they arrive on our doorstep is to set ourselves up to fail. This is why the UK needs to re-establish itself as a climate leader on the global stage.

Taking on the challenge of climate change is also an incredible opportunity for jobs and growth all across the country. It will improve our health, our quality of life and our overall prosperity.

The Government have already begun work to deliver on this opportunity, through our mission to achieve clean power by 2030 and accelerating our transition to net zero. We have lifted the de facto ban on onshore wind in England, consented significant amounts of solar, introduced legislation to switch on Great British Energy, created the UK's first carbon capture clusters, and held the most successful renewables auction to date.

We have put clean energy at the heart of our mission-driven Government, because we know that boosting home-grown, renewable energy is the best way to reduce our exposure to volatile fossil fuel markets, protect bill payers, and strengthen our energy independence. The UK will restore its position as a global leader on climate action, building on the power of example to encourage other nations to follow its lead, and working with international partners to support decarbonisation globally.

COP28 in Dubai saw the first global stocktake under the Paris agreement which illustrated the scale of the challenge—by 2030, emissions need to fall by 43% versus the 2% currently projected and climate finance must increase at least fivefold, drawing on all sources.

The 29th conference of the parties under the UNFCCC will be hosted by Azerbaijan in Baku from 11 to 22 November. It presents the first opportunity in 15 years to agree a new finance goal to replace the current \$100 billion target. At the same time, countries must demonstrate progress towards delivering on existing commitments

including those in the global stocktake—to transition away from fossil fuels, triple renewables, double energy efficiency, and halt and reverse nature and forest loss.

The UK will work with the COP29 presidency and other partners to push for progress in the following three key areas:

*Scaling up finance from all sources to accelerate global transitions.* We need to agree an ambitious new collective quantified goal on climate finance for the period after 2025. The UK is committed to working with countries to design a climate finance goal that is fit for purpose and supports those most vulnerable to climate impacts, crowding in private finance while recognising the constraints on the public finances in the UK. Outside the negotiations, we need to accelerate reform of the global financial system to address the transition and resilience finance gaps and barriers that countries face.

*Scaling up ambition and action to keep 1.5 Paris agreement goal within reach ahead of COP30.* As agreed at COP28, countries must come forward with ambitious, all-economy, 1.5°C-aligned nationally determined contributions for 2035 by next February to bridge the emissions gap. As the Prime Minister announced at the United Nations General Assembly in September, the UK will come forward with our own ambitious, 1.5-aligned NDC at COP29 and will support others to do the same. Globally, we need to accelerate the global transition in energy and other sectors and the UK will show progress on this through initiatives such as the breakthrough agenda and the global clean power alliance—a progressive alliance of developed and developing countries working together to accelerate the deployment of clean power globally and mobilise public and private finance to support clean energy. The alliance will help to bridge the financing gap with the global south and enable more countries to secure the benefits of clean, cheap power.

*Building resilience to current and future climate impacts.* The UK is committed to achieving a climate-resilient and nature-positive world, supporting the most vulnerable and marginalised who are experiencing the worst impacts of the climate and nature crises. Within the NCQG process, we will work for an ambitious outcome on adaptation finance that maximises nature co-benefits. We would also like to see progress on both the global goal on adaptation and the operationalisation of the fund for responding to loss and damage.

Across all these areas, we must recognise the crucial, often overlooked role of high-ambition action on nature including forests in mitigating and adapting to climate change. This means aligning UNFCCC outcomes with the targets of the global biodiversity framework and joining up approaches to tackling climate, biodiversity, and pollution across NDCs, national adaptation plans and national biodiversity strategies and action plans all in the broader context of achieving the sustainable development goals. It includes protecting the ocean through the ocean and climate change dialogue and restoring forests through the Forest and Climate Leaders' Partnership.

The Prime Minister, along with other ministers, will attend COP over the two weeks and I will be leading the UK's delegation during the negotiations.

We are determined to do everything in our power to accelerate global action to reduce emissions this decade and keep within reach the 1.5°C goal in the Paris agreement.

[HCWS201]



## Written Corrections

*Monday 11 November 2024*

### Ministerial Corrections

#### CABINET OFFICE

##### Public Procurement

*The following extract is from the debate on Public Procurement on 24 October 2024.*

**Georgia Gould:** The Chancellor of the Exchequer recently took decisive action by appointing a new covid counter-fraud commissioner to help us recover public money and ensure that this never happens again.

[*Official Report*, 24 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 388.]

*Written correction submitted by the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould):*

**Georgia Gould:** The Chancellor of the Exchequer recently took decisive action by **commencing the appointment of** a new covid counter-fraud commissioner to help us recover public money and ensure that this never happens again.

#### DEFENCE

##### Afghan Special Forces Relocation Review

*The following extract is from the statement on the Afghan Special Forces Relocation Review on 14 October 2024.*

**Luke Pollard:** The agreement we have with the Pakistani Government means that anyone who is being assessed as part of the ARAP scheme will not be deported back to Afghanistan, which is really important, but there is

still a requirement to make sure that we can relocate eligible individuals and their immediate families to the UK in an appropriate and reasonable way.

[*Official Report*, 14 October 2024; Vol. 754, c. 618.]

*Written correction submitted by the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard):*

**Luke Pollard:** The agreement we have with the Pakistani Government means that anyone who is **confirmed as ARAP-eligible should** not be deported back to Afghanistan, which is really important, but there is still a requirement to make sure that we can relocate eligible individuals and their immediate families to the UK in an appropriate and reasonable way.

### Other Correction

#### DR BEN SPENCER

##### Cancer Strategy for England

*The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Cancer Strategy for England on 31 October 2024.*

**Dr Ben Spencer:** Community diagnostic centres and surgical hubs made a difference. They were backed by a £2.3 billion investment, the largest cash investment in MRI and CT scanning in the history of the NHS; those scans, tests and checks are now being delivered in 170 CDC sites.

[*Official Report*, 31 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 371WH.]

*Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer):*

**Dr Ben Spencer:** Community diagnostic centres and surgical hubs made a difference. They were backed by a £2.3 billion investment, the largest cash investment in MRI and CT scanning in the history of the NHS; those scans, tests and checks are now being delivered in **at least 165** CDC sites.





# ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 11 November 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>WORK AND PENSIONS</b> .....	481	<b>WORK AND PENSIONS—continued</b>	
Carers: Support .....	492	Pensions Review.....	494
Child Poverty .....	481	PIP Application Process .....	483
Child Poverty .....	493	Poverty .....	488
Household Support Fund: Extension .....	490	Topical Questions .....	496
Jobcentres: Broxbourne .....	489	Universal Credit: Assessment .....	488
Parents Looking for Work .....	494	Universal Credit: Two-child Limit .....	490
Pension Credit: Uptake.....	485	Winter Fuel Payment Eligibility: Impact.....	495
Pension Credit: Uptake.....	493	Young People Not in Education, Employment or	
Pension Credit: Uptake.....	495	Training .....	483
Pensioner Poverty .....	491		

# WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 11 November 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>	<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO</b> .....	17WS	
COP29: Priorities.....	17WS	

# WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Monday 11 November 2024

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS</b> .....	5WC	<b>OTHER CORRECTION</b> .....	6WC
Cabinet Office.....	5WC	Dr Ben Spencer .....	6WC
Public Procurement.....	5WC	Cancer Strategy for England .....	6WC
Defence.....	5WC		
Afghan Special Forces Relocation Review.....	5WC		

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than  
Monday 18 November 2024**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE  
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.



---

## CONTENTS

**Monday 11 November 2024**

**Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 481] [see index inside back page]**  
*Secretary of State for Work and Pensions*

**Defence: 2.5 GDP Spending Commitment [Col. 503]**  
*Answer to urgent question—(John Healey)*

**Point of Order [Col. 516]**

**Rail Performance [Col. 517]**  
*Statement—(Louise Haigh)*

**Rural Affairs [Col. 533]**  
*General debate*

**Mental Health: Farming and Agricultural Communities [Col. 612]**  
*Debate on motion for Adjournment*

**Written Statement [Col. 17WS]**

**Written Corrections [Col. 5WC]**  
*Ministerial corrections*  
*Other correction*

---