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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 13 November 2024**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 13 November 2024*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

*The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—*

#### **Violence against Women and Girls: Prevention in Schools**

1. **Jodie Gosling** (Nuneaton) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the effectiveness of primary prevention measures in schools in tackling violence against women and girls. [901190]

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson):** Education has a role to play in the prevention of violence against women and girls, and it is essential to the Government's safer streets mission. We are reviewing the relationship, sex and health education guidance to ensure that it enables schools to tackle harmful behaviour, because we are determined to ensure that misogyny is stamped out and not allowed to proliferate in schools.

**Jodie Gosling:** We know that sexual violence is a critical problem in our schools. In 2021, in response to Ofsted's rapid review, 92% of girls and 74% of boys said that sexist names were used "sometimes" or "a lot". Harassment of this kind has become commonplace in educational settings, and harmful sexual practices are becoming a risk. Will the Minister meet me, and White Ribbon UK, to discuss how primary prevention measures can be introduced into school curriculums to tackle violence against women and girls?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that issue further. She brings real expertise from her background in education, and it is essential that we do more to tackle the behaviour that she has identified. I welcome the work of White Ribbon, and I hope other Members will be able to support that work later this month.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): When it comes to young boys and young girls in schools, and when it comes to bullying and, sometimes, things that happen at home, the relationship between the teacher or classroom assistant and the pupil is very important, making it possible to identify problems that may arise at home and then roll over into school. Can the Minister give us some idea of what is being done to improve that relationship, so that children who fall by the wayside can be saved?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The hon. Gentleman has raised an important issue. It is crucial for teachers and school staff to have what they need in order to tackle harmful behaviour and language in schools. Sadly, sometimes the very staff he talks about are on the receiving end of such attitudes and behaviour, which is completely unacceptable. As Education Secretary, I will do all I can to ensure that school staff and teachers in England have the support they need in tackling behaviour of this kind.

### **Violence against Women and Girls**

2. **Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle violence against women and girls. [901191]

8. **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle violence against women and girls. [901197]

9. **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle violence against women and girls. [901198]

14. **Claire Hughes** (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to tackle violence against women and girls. [901203]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips):** This Government are committed to using all the levers at our disposal to deliver our mission to halve violence against women and girls. We have already announced our intention to embed specialist domestic abuse advisers in 999 control rooms, launched pilots for the new domestic abuse protection orders, and implemented a duty on employers to anticipate occasions when sexual harassment may occur and take responsible steps to prevent it.

**Kevin Bonavia:** I am very pleased to hear that from the Minister. I am proud that in Stevenage, independent domestic violence advocates and independent sexual violence advocates working for Survivors Against Domestic Abuse—also known as SADA—do brilliant but challenging work supporting those who are at risk and suffering as a result of domestic or sexual abuse throughout Hertfordshire. There is no doubt that IDVAs and ISVAs are a key part of domestic abuse provision across the country, so will the Minister assure me that the Government will continue to support them in the vital work that they do?

**Jess Phillips:** Having done that work myself, I am more than happy to champion and praise the work of IDVAs and ISVAs. As my hon. Friend might imagine, we will use every tool available to us, including those vital roles, to target perpetrators and address the root causes of abuse and violence.

**Alice Macdonald:** When I spoke to the chief constable of Norfolk constabulary recently, he told me that if a suspect were arrested and charged today with a serious sexual offence such as rape, the Crown court trial could commence in the spring of 2026, which is more than a year away. That is totally unacceptable. What can the Minister do to reassure women in Norfolk who are waiting for their cases to be heard?

**Jess Phillips:** It is indeed totally unacceptable, and it is, I am afraid, a legacy of a totally failed justice system. We know that owing to the complexity of the system, rape victims are often left to wait disproportionately longer than others who are already waiting too long. In our manifesto we committed ourselves to fast-tracking rape cases. We are carefully considering the best way to do that, along with colleagues at the Ministry of Justice who lead on this work, and we will announce our plans in due course.

**Harpreet Uppal:** I recently joined a Reclaim the Night march in Greenhead park in my constituency. The first of these marches took place in Leeds in the 1970s, and they are still important, because a woman is killed every three days in the UK. What actions are we taking to prioritise reducing the level of violence against women and girls, and also to create safer environments at night?

**Jess Phillips:** I thank my hon. Friend for question. The first march was in 1977 and, frankly, progress has been too slow if we still need to march. We will use a cross-Government, transformative approach to halve violence against women and girls, and that will be underpinned by a new violence against women and girls strategy, to be published next year. That will include drastically improving the police and criminal justice response. Prevention and education are also absolutely fundamental to our approach, and we will work across key Departments, including the Department for Education, to tackle the root causes of these crimes.

**Claire Hughes:** Pupils in my constituency are benefiting from pioneering workshops that are designed to increase awareness of sexual violence and misogyny through a project called “Don’t Steal My Future”. Does the Minister agree that raising awareness of sexual violence in an age-appropriate way is vital to keeping young people safe? If so, will she come with me to meet the team at the Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre North Wales?

**Jess Phillips:** The simple answer is yes, I do agree. As somebody who has written and delivered such programmes in schools, I know that brilliant work is going on across the country in local authorities, multi-academy trusts and more widely, with voluntary sector organisations doing a lot of the work. I would be glad to explore with officials the best way to learn from those who work with children and young people, because we have to work out what will work in our schools and then make sure that we put it out everywhere.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** In the last Parliament, we Back Benchers tried and failed several times to make misogyny a hate crime. Legislation can be a powerful game changer. Is it not time we made misogyny a hate crime?

**Jess Phillips:** The Government are absolutely committed to tackling misogyny, both before it starts and when it exists. Hate crime reviews are being undertaken, and I am more than happy to meet the hon. Lady. I have met her many times to discuss this subject.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** Women fleeing domestic violence are vulnerable and in desperate need of support and help, but often local authorities, which are supposed to help, do not enable women to get a

place to live or receive their benefits. In the last Parliament, we tried to make sure that women in such circumstances could have a relative claim their benefits. What action will the Minister take to ensure that those women are given the support that they need in their desperate times?

**Jess Phillips:** I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman, and I remember his valiant efforts during the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The Government have committed to ensuring that local connection does not apply in cases such as those he talks about. With regard to benefits, the Department for Work and Pensions is very much part of the mission group on violence against women and girls, and I will absolutely raise his points. We will seek to make sure that when and wherever people crop up with these issues, their local authorities and local systems are in place.

**Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP):** In the 12 months to July 2024, 22,403 violence against women and girls offences were recorded in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister outline what discussions she has had with the Police Service of Northern Ireland about getting stronger conviction rates for such incidents of violence?

**Jess Phillips:** I have spoken to the Chief Constable of the PSNI within the last week, and he has requested that we go over to Northern Ireland. That trip is planned for early in the new year, and I would very much welcome working with colleagues in this House and the devolved Government to make sure that we are all working together on this issue.

**Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind):** A constituent of mine came to see me in distress a couple of weeks ago, having been a victim of rape in 2021. She has now been given a date in 2026 for her case to be heard. I am sure the whole House will agree with me that that is completely unacceptable. She has been denied access to mental health support during this time, because it may impact her defence. What are the Minister’s thoughts on that matter?

**Jess Phillips:** I would like to say very clearly from the Dispatch Box that it is a total myth that people cannot access mental health support when awaiting trial. It is something that has crept in over the years, and I would like it to be stamped out for good across all agencies. I ran a rape crisis service that definitely served people who were awaiting trial. If I were the Member of Parliament representing the hon. Gentleman’s constituent, I would push back on that assertion and say that it is certainly not the policy.

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

**Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD):** Data shows us that women of colour face disproportionate rates of homicide and that adults of black, black British or mixed ethnicity are more likely to experience sexual assault than those of white, Asian or other ethnicities. These challenges are just as common when it comes to domestic abuse. Those people are less likely to access support services than white women. We desperately need stronger action to support these vulnerable women,

so can the Minister tell me how the Government will ensure that we help more women from ethnic minority backgrounds to get the support that they need and end the injustice that they face?

**Jess Phillips:** I could not agree more with the hon. Lady, as she might imagine, considering the seat that I represent. We need a strong “by and for” service in our country. We need to ensure that the geographical location of someone in the country does not matter, and that specialist services are available for black and minority ethnic women and other marginalised groups—for example, disabled victims of domestic abuse or victims of domestic abuse in the armed forces. There needs to be a specialist approach for specialist groups and we will be making sure that that is part of our violence against women and girls strategy.

### Disabled People: Discrimination

3. **Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help end discrimination against disabled people. [901192]

7. **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help end discrimination against disabled people. [901196]

**The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms):** Our manifesto committed us to championing the rights of, and working with, disabled people, putting their views and voices at the heart of all we do. We want a more inclusive society, removing the unnecessary barriers that have too often held disabled people back.

**Samantha Niblett:** I want to draw the Minister’s attention to the fact that almost one in five people in my constituency are classed as disabled, and after 14 years of a Conservative Government who slashed public services, there are still far too many people in South Derbyshire who report that their daily activities are significantly limited by their conditions. What more can this Government do in my constituency to support disabled people in accessing care as well as career and educational opportunities?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** My hon. Friend, in describing her constituency, speaks for the whole country. Disabled people and people with health impairments are very diverse, and we want to promote diverse, specialist initiatives to support people to stay in work, to get back into work if they have lost their job, and to progress in work, including by joining up local employment and help support. We need to remove barriers to accessing services as well.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

**Sarah Owen:** I am sure that many of us will welcome commitments from the Government to remove barriers to work for disabled people, but disability charities have outlined concerns about the Government’s plans for work capability assessment reform and changes to personal independence payments and the Access to Work scheme. Will the Minister please commit to working with disability charities to ensure that any changes to those schemes,

including any proposed by the previous Government, are made alongside consultation with the people those policies will affect?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. As I have said, we are committed to putting the views and voices of disabled people at the heart of everything we do and, in looking at these issues, to consulting properly and amply with disabled people and with their organisations.

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): Nowhere are disabled people more discriminated against than on Britain’s railways. The previous Government had an Access for All scheme that would allow disabled people to get to platforms that were otherwise inaccessible. This has been put on hold by the new Government. Can the Minister tell me what discussions he has had with his colleagues in the Department for Transport and when we might see stations such as Whitchurch made accessible to people who cannot manage steps?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I am afraid that I cannot talk about the situation at Whitchurch, but the hon. Lady speaks for many on this, as there have been some high-profile and troubling instances of problems in this area over recent months. This is a good example of the kind of issue where, as Ministers, we need to be talking across Government Departments and making sure that barriers, like the one she has described, are removed. We are determined to do that.

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Young women and girls in my constituency travel abroad to stay with relatives, sometimes for several weeks or months, and they get into difficulties or are impacted by safeguarding issues. Will the Secretary of State confirm what support is available to help repatriate such girls who have dual nationality and have, in many instances, had false allegations made against them by perpetrators who do not want them to leave the country?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** That question is perhaps more relevant to the previous group of questions, but I am very happy to make sure that we write to the hon. Gentleman to set out the support that is available.

### Supporting Women into Work

4. **Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): What steps the Government are taking to support women back into work. [901193]

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson):** We are laying the foundations for all employers to create conditions that enable women to return to work and to thrive in their careers. As part of our efforts to make work pay, we will improve access to flexible working, strengthen workplace protections for new mothers and review the parental leave system.

**Caroline Voaden:** Parents of pre-school children in South Devon are finding it all but impossible to find nursery or pre-school places due to the lack of availability and the financial pressure that such establishments are under. This is making it extremely difficult for parents, often mothers, who would like to return to work after having children. How will the Department for Education



and the Office for Equality and Opportunity work together to increase the number of nurseries and provide them with adequate funding to ensure that women are provided with all the support they need to return to work?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The hon. Lady is right to identify that accessible and affordable childcare is essential for making sure that women, in particular, are able to work, to work the hours that suit them and to progress in their careers. That is why we have confirmed that we will be expanding Government-funded childcare with an initial £1.8 billion. As part of that programme, we will be rolling out 3,000 new or expanded primary-based nurseries. Applications are open, and schools are encouraged to participate.

**Apsana Begum** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): The all-party parliamentary group on domestic violence and abuse was reconstituted this week. As its chair, I am pleased to report that, at our first meeting, we heard from survivors and organisations that support survivors in the workplace.

The Minister will be aware that the gender pay gap persists. Does she agree that more could be done to support survivors in the workplace, such as by having domestic abuse policies in every workplace, and by considering paid leave and flexible working, so that survivors can get the life-changing support they need and can stay in work?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I agree with the hon. Lady. Before I came to this place, I ran a refuge for women and children affected by domestic violence. During that time, I saw some good examples of employers supporting women who were going through a very difficult time in their lives. There is more that we can ask of employers, and there is more that we, as a Government, are committed to achieving, especially through the gender pay gap action plans we will be taking forward, and through halving violence against women and girls.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Mims Davies** (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): It is working women who will pay the price for Labour's Budget of broken promises, with the increase to employers' national insurance contributions making working people worse off and affecting childcare settings. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that single-parent families—80% of them are headed by women—will, on average, be £1,000 worse off by October 2029. Has the Minister assessed what additional negative impact there will be on the labour market of the hidden scrapping of the child benefit changes for single-parent households? This has been described by Martin Lewis as an “unfair” penalty to single-parent households.

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are committed to transforming the lives of women across our country, and that applies to single parents, too. I am leading the child poverty taskforce with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Unlike the last Government, we are committed to driving down the number of children growing up in poverty. The last Government left a shocking record of rising levels of child poverty, and this Government will turn it around.

## Topical Questions

T1. [901205] **Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson):** I draw the House's attention to Islamophobia Awareness Month. No one in our country should be targeted because of their faith or race, and British Muslims are a crucial part of Britain's history and society.

More widely, the Office for Equality and Opportunity is already making great strides. The new Employment Rights Bill will legislate for a stronger duty to prevent sexual harassment, and action plans will cover the gender pay gap and menopause issues. We will open a consultation on extending pay gap reporting and equal pay rights to ethnic minorities and disabled people.

**Daniel Francis:** The disability charity Sense estimates that 200,000 disabled children across the UK are struggling to get the right school support, because of funding issues and a need to employ more multisensory impairment teachers to ensure deafblind children can access education. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure disabled children are represented in the forthcoming children's wellbeing Bill?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend champions the rights of disabled children. He is right to do so because when it comes to support for children with special educational needs and disabilities, the system we have at the moment just is not working, as shown all too clearly by the recent National Audit Office report. I am determined to listen to parents, experts, charities and others to ensure we reform the system to provide more timely intervention and support for children and families, and ensure all children in our country are able to thrive.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister for Equalities.

**Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): I am honoured to take on the role of shadow Minister for Equalities and I pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), who will be at this Dispatch Box shortly. The equalities brief underpins values that I cherish: fairness, freedom, meritocracy and equality under the law. I believe people should be judged by the content of their character, not the colour of their skin or any other identity characteristic. Does the Secretary of State agree that equality is not about group identities or placing one section of society on a platform above another, but about individual freedom and responsibility?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I welcome the right hon. Lady to her place. I look forward to working with her on areas where we can agree and where we can take such concerns forward on a cross-party basis, wherever possible. I believe that she, like me, is passionate about tackling violence against women and girls. As she sets out, I believe that everyone in our country should have the chance to achieve all that they are capable of achieving. Our mission across Government is to ensure that where people are from does not determine what they can go on to achieve.

**Claire Coutinho:** During the election campaign, the Conservative party committed to clarifying the definition of “sex” in the Equality Act 2010 to protect women’s rights. At the end of this month, *For Women Scotland v. Scottish Ministers* will be heard in the UK Supreme Court. The case will have far-reaching consequences for sex-based rights, so can the Government assure the House that they are now clear that the definition in “sex” in the Equality Act 2010 means biological sex?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The right hon. Lady will appreciate that I will not comment on ongoing cases. However, I can be clear that the Equality Act 2010 sets out that providers, for example, have the right to restrict access to service on the basis of biological sex. This Government are proud of our achievements in legislating for the Equality Act. We will ensure providers can continue to support single-sex exemptions, and it is important that providers have clarity in this area. I would be happy to work with her to ensure that is the case.

T4. [901208] **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Will the Minister have discussions with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on how pavement design and layout can be improved to enhance navigability for blind and visually impaired people?

**The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms):** That is good example of the kind of discussion we need among Ministers responsible for disability across Government. Department for Transport guidance on inclusive mobility and on tactile paving surfaces advises how design and layout can inform visually impaired people, including about hazards and directions. I am happy to pursue the subject further with my hon. Friend.

T2. [901206] **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Voluntary Organisations Disability Group represents over 100 charities, including Mencap and Sense. It has said that the Budget will have “life-changing consequences” and its chief executive has said that the

“Labour government is letting them down”.

It says the increase in national insurance contributions will put frontline services at risk, so what will the Government do to mitigate that risk for those charities, which are so important to those with disabilities?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** We are working very closely with disability organisations, and I pay tribute to the work of those to which the hon. Gentleman referred. We will certainly ensure that barriers that too often confront disabled people are removed by this Government. That is the mission that we are on.

T5. [901209] **Dr Beccy Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): According to the Darzi report, there has been a substantial decline in the social determinants of health, such as poor-quality housing, access to clean air and good nutrition. How is the Minister working with Cabinet colleagues to include health in policies that address those social determinants of health and tackle the health inequalities that are the legacy the Conservative Government left the country to deal with?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend brings real expertise to the House in this area. We are committed across Government to tackling the social determinants of health and the stark health inequalities that sadly blight the life chances of too many across our country.

T3. [901207] **Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): During a hospital stay, my constituent, a new mother with an exclusively breastfed infant, encountered resistance from staff when trying to keep her child with her. The distress caused left her needing post-traumatic stress disorder therapy. What steps is the Minister taking with Government colleagues to ensure that hospitals support breastfeeding mothers appropriately?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The hon. Lady raises an important point, and I am very sorry to hear about her constituent’s experience. I will make sure that a Health Minister picks up on that point and has a conversation with her, because new mothers, including those who are breastfeeding, absolutely deserve the right level of support and advice.

T6. [901210] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Australia, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands have called on Afghanistan to cease what they say are violations of the UN convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. This is the precursor before they take their case to the International Court of Justice. Will the UK be joining them?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Mr Speaker, please forgive me, but I did not quite hear all of my hon. Friend’s question, but I will make sure that the issue she identifies is picked up by the relevant Minister and that she receives a full response.

**Mr Speaker:** Before we come to Prime Minister’s questions, I wish to welcome our special guest, His Excellency the Speaker of the House of the People of Somalia, who will be observing our proceedings today. Your Excellency, you are most welcome.

## PRIME MINISTER

### *The Prime Minister was asked—* **Engagements**

Q1. [901155] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 13 November.

**The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer):** On Monday, I was honoured to join President Macron to mark Armistice Day in Paris and, together, we paid tribute to the fallen of the first world war, and all subsequent conflicts, who made the ultimate sacrifice for the freedom that we enjoy today.

I also attended the COP summit. My focus, as ever, was on British energy security and the jobs of the future that should be on our shores—central issues of concern to people in this country. It is also Islamophobia Awareness Month, and I reaffirm our commitment to standing against discrimination and racism in all their forms.

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

**Christine Jardine:** In the two weeks since the Budget, several GP practices in my constituency of Edinburgh West, including my own, have contacted me with their genuine fears that the impact of the changes to national insurance employer contributions will threaten their ability to continue to offer the public the same standard of health service that they currently receive. And they are far from the only ones struggling, particularly in the health and social care sectors. Can the Prime Minister explain to me—perhaps he and his Chancellor would like to come to my constituency and explain to GPs, charities and others—how they are meant to cope without extra support from the Government?

**The Prime Minister:** Because of the tough decisions that we took, we have put forward a Budget with an extra £25.6 billion for the NHS and for social care. That includes an increase to carers' allowance and £600 million to deal with the pressures of adult social care. We will ensure that GP practices have the resources that they need, and the funding arrangements between the NHS and contractors will be set out in the usual way.

Q2. [901156] **Lloyd Hatton** (South Dorset) (Lab): Members have raised their concerns about a range of damaging policies pursued by the Leader of the Opposition. This includes voting against critical investment for our NHS, stating that maternity pay is excessive and the minimum wage a burden, and even backing harmful fracking when last in government. Is the Prime Minister aware of any attempt by the Leader of the Opposition to justify these dangerous positions, which would cause untold damage to communities such as mine in South Dorset?

**The Prime Minister:** This Government have given millions of people a pay rise of £1,400 by boosting the minimum wage. We have strengthened parental leave with better rights for parents and put huge investment into our schools and NHS—and all that while ensuring that the payslips of working people have not been affected. It is clear whose side we are on: the working people of this country. I have not heard the Leader of the Opposition clarify why she opposes all these things, but now is her chance.

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

**Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (North West Essex) (Con): The Prime Minister can plant as many questions as he likes with his Back Benchers, but at the end of the day I am the one he has to face at the Dispatch Box. I welcome him back from his trip to Azerbaijan, where he has unilaterally made commitments that will make life more expensive for everyone back home. Speaking of making life—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Somebody is suggesting reading; I think you will notice that the Prime Minister also reads, so please get your act together.

**Mrs Badenoch:** I can pre-prepare my questions, but the Prime Minister needs to answer from his mind. He has made life more expensive with his unilateral

commitments but, speaking of making life more expensive, will the Prime Minister confirm that he will keep the cap on council tax?

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Lady talks of the trip to COP. I am very proud of the fact that we are restoring leadership on climate to the UK, because that will be measured in lower bills, energy independence and the jobs of the future. She may have missed this, but on Monday I was very pleased to announce a huge order into jobs in Hull for blades for offshore wind. If she is opposed to that sort of action, she should go to Hull and say so. On the question of councils, she knows what the arrangements are.

**Mrs Badenoch:** I think the House will have heard that the Prime Minister could neither confirm nor deny whether the cap on council tax was being raised, so I will ask him this: how much extra does he expect local authorities will have to raise to cover the social care funding gap created by the Chancellor's Budget and increases in employers' NI? He told the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) just now that he was covering social care. How much extra does he expect local authorities to raise?

**The Prime Minister:** This knockabout is all very well, but not actually listening to what I said three minutes ago is a bit of a fundamental failure of the Leader of the Opposition. I just said £600 million, and I repeat it: £600 million.

**Mrs Badenoch:** The Prime Minister has repeated that number because he has probably not listened to the Labour-run Local Government Association, which said that with no separate funding for the Chancellor's Budget announcements, care providers would likely see increased costs, which will cost councils more. All of the £600 million in grant increase he is giving will not cover what is required for adult social care. It is clear that the Government have not thought through the impact of the Budget, and this is the problem with having a copy-and-paste Chancellor. Did they not realise that care homes, GP surgeries, children's nurseries, hospices and even charities have to pay employers' NI?

**The Prime Minister:** We have put more money into local authorities than the Conservatives did in 14 years. They left them in an absolutely catastrophic state. We have produced a Budget that does not increase tax on working people—nothing in the payslip—and is investing in our NHS, investing in our schools so every child can go as far as their talent will take them, and investing in the houses of the future. If she is against those things, she should say so.

**Mrs Badenoch:** I am not against any of those things—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Of course not; none of us is against any of those things. But the Prime Minister has confirmed that he does not know what is going on. He probably does not realise that on Monday the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government revealed that councils will need to find an additional £2.4 billion in council tax next year. That is a lot more than £600 million. I know he has been away, but did the Deputy Prime Minister, who runs that Department, make him aware of their £2.4 billion black hole?



**The Prime Minister:** Let me get this straight: the Leader of the Opposition does not want any of the measures in the Budget, but she wants all the benefits? The magic money tree is back after two weeks in office. The Conservatives have learned absolutely nothing. We have put forward a Budget that takes the difficult decisions, fixing the £22 billion black hole that they left and investing in the future of our country. They say that they want all that, but they do not know how they will pay for it—same old Tories.

**Mrs Badenoch:** Even the Prime Minister must admit that Labour fiddled the fiscal rules. The Office for Budget Responsibility has said that it does not recognise where the additional growth will come from. The fact is that the rise in employer national insurance will be a disaster for small businesses around the country. Let me tell you about Kelly, Mr Speaker. For over 20 years, Kelly has run an after-school club business supporting 500 children and families in her borough. In 2024, her national insurance cost was about £10,000; in April, that will rise to £26,000—that is a 150% increase in costs from the Budget alone. If Kelly's small business goes under, what is the Prime Minister's message to her and the 500 families it supports?

**The Prime Minister:** I would say this to Kelly: we inherited a very badly damaged economy and a £22 billion black hole, and we were not prepared to continue with the fiction. We stabilised—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Ms Lopez, I am sure I can expect better from you as a Parliamentary Private Secretary.

**The Prime Minister:** I would say to Kelly that we are fixing the mess that we were left and are investing in the future of our country. I would also say to her that the Leader of the Opposition, in week two, wants all the benefits from the Budget but has no way of saying how she will pay for them—the same old mistake over and over again.

**Mrs Badenoch:** The Prime Minister has nothing to offer but platitudes. The fact is that the Government do not know what they are doing. Their ideological Budget was designed to milk the private sector and hope that nobody would notice. Now, his Cabinet Ministers are all queuing up for public sector bail-outs for his tax mess. If he is going to bail out the public sector, perhaps he can tell us this: does he think it appropriate to approve—as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has done—a four-day week for councils? That is not flexible working but part-time work for full-time pay.

**The Prime Minister:** Questions based on what we are actually doing are usually better than made-up fantasy questions. What did the Tories deliver in 14 years? Low growth, a stagnant economy, a disastrous mini-Budget and a £22 billion black hole. And now, the Leader of the Opposition wants to give me advice on running the economy. I do not want to be rude, but no, thank you very much.

**Q5. [901159] Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab):** Towns like Southport need investment and support after 14 years of decline under the Conservative party. Will

the Prime Minister confirm that his Budget will provide that much-needed investment for towns like mine, and that, unlike under the previous Government, my local authority and the public services that my town relies on will finally be properly supported?

**The Prime Minister:** May I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend and his Southport constituents. They have shown extraordinary courage and resilience as they try to rebuild from the devastating tragedy and loss of earlier this year. We will ensure that the people of Southport are supported now and in the years to come. The Budget is designed to fix the crucial services that his constituents rely on, including through £1.3 billion of new funding for local government, and investment in safer streets and in the future of our NHS. That is the direction in which we are taking the country.

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

**Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD):** When it comes to fixing the crisis in the NHS that he has inherited, the Prime Minister has rightly recognised the need to improve access to GPs, but as is the case for my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), GPs in my constituency are writing to tell me how worried they are about the national insurance hike's impact on patient care. I listened very carefully to what the Prime Minister said to my hon. Friend, but I hope he will think again. Will he at least exempt GPs, community pharmacists and other health and care providers from that tax rise?

**The Prime Minister:** I hear the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes, and I understand the concern. We have made a huge investment in our NHS—the biggest ever investment in our NHS for many, many years—and certainly almost all the people working in the NHS are very pleased to see that investment in them and in their service. On the question of GPs, we will ensure that they have the resources they need, and the funding arrangements will be set out in the usual way later this year.

**Ed Davey:** I have to say, I think patients, GPs and others listening to that answer will want more reassurance, and will want it much more quickly.

Turning to the war in Ukraine, a senior adviser to President-elect Trump, Donald Trump junior, has shared a post on Instagram declaring that soon, within the next few weeks, President Zelensky will “lose his allowance”. If the Trump Administration do withdraw support from our brave Ukrainian allies, will the UK and Europe step up to fill the gap? Will the Prime Minister seize frozen Russian assets—not just the interest, but the assets underlying it—so that we can fund a huge boost to the Ukrainian forces in their fight against Putin's war machine?

**The Prime Minister:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have been resolute and strong in our support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. As he also knows, in recent weeks, I have been speaking with other leaders about how we put Ukraine in the best and strongest possible position at this time. I will continue those discussions.

Q6. [901160] **David Baines** (St Helens North) (Lab): Child poverty is a national scandal. In St Helens North, it increased by over 50% under the previous Government. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need to address this scandal, ideally cross-party? If so, does he share my concern that the Conservatives have opposed actions that we are taking with the Budget, employment rights, housing and more, not to mention their leader's comments on maternity pay, which suggests they just do not get what working families and their children need?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Under the Conservative party, we saw child poverty increase by 700,000. This is a Budget that not only invests in our NHS and our schools, but ensures that working people will not face a penny extra in their payslips or at the petrol pump. That is because when it comes to the tough decisions on tax, we have not touched national insurance, income tax or VAT, just as we promised, on working people. We also gave 3 million of the lowest paid a pay rise, something that the Conservative party seems to be opposing.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): Lebanon is in crisis, and my constituent Catherine Flanagan is in despair. Her three-year-old son David Nahle has been out of her care for the past two years. The Belfast High Court has indicated that he should be returned to his mother and has issued a bench warrant for the arrest of his father. However, when my constituent fled domestic violence in Beirut, she got no help or assistance from the UK embassy, and when she has sought assistance from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to be reunited with her son—to see her son again, and for this British citizen to come back to the UK—she has not received the assistance that she, or I and our community, expect she should. Will the Prime Minister engage with this issue and, at the very least, ask the Foreign Secretary to assist my constituent in her earnest desire to see her three-year-old son again?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Member for raising this case, and for all he is doing on behalf of Catherine and David—I hope they get some comfort from knowing that they have an MP working so hard on their behalf. It is a complex and difficult situation, but of course I will make sure that the relevant meetings are set up with the relevant Ministers to ensure the right hon. Member gets the answers he needs on behalf of his constituents.

Q8. [901162] **Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): My constituency is the home of UK brewing, and has the best pubs in the country. The Prime Minister is welcome to join me for a pint to sample the very best beer in the world. As this Government look to reform business rates and consult on those changes, will he commit to ensuring that pubs and hospitality have a seat at the table?

**The Prime Minister:** The last time I went to my hon. Friend's constituency I got to see the fantastic South Derbyshire college. I look forward to testing his proposition that he has the best pubs in his constituency on some future occasion. Pubs and breweries are such an important part of our culture and our communities. That is why the Budget delivered an £85 million per year tax cut for

pubs, reducing the duty on a pint. We also delivered a 40% relief on business rates for next year, permanently lowering them the year after. We are protecting small businesses by more than doubling the employer allowance to £10,500.

Q3. [901157] **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): In the past week, there have been reports that more schools are slated for closure as a direct consequence of the Prime Minister's ideologically driven policy to introduce VAT on school fees and increase national insurance contributions. This pattern will be seen up and down the country and will lead to staff being unemployed and pupils and parents being cast adrift. Will the Prime Minister do the decent thing, abandon this policy and apologise to those affected?

**The Prime Minister:** I do understand the concerns of those who save to send their children to private school because they believe in aspiration and opportunity. Every single parent shares that aspiration to opportunity, whichever school they send their children to. Under the last Government, we did not have enough teachers in basic subjects in our state secondary schools. The Tories were prepared to tolerate that. I am not.

Q13. [901167] **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Three million people across the country, including an estimated 70,000 in Wales, will benefit from Labour's Budget measures on the minimum wage and the national living wage. Members should contrast that with the Leader of the Opposition, who said that the minimum wage was hurting businesses, or the shadow Chancellor, who called the minimum wage a "burden". Does the Prime Minister agree that those comments underline that the Tories have no interest in protecting working people or boosting the income of the lowest paid?

**The Prime Minister:** It was the last Labour Government who introduced the national minimum wage—in the teeth of opposition from the Tory party. I am proud that this Government have now increased it by over 16%. That means an increase of over £2,500 a year for a full-time worker aged 18 to 20. Whether it is our Employment Rights Bill or decisions at the Budget, this is a Government who are proudly on the side of Britain's working people.

Q4. [901158] **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): Now that Sue Gray has, remarkably, turned down the opportunity to be the Prime Minister's special envoy to the nations, will he finally admit that it was an invented job on taxpayers' money for one of his cronies? If it wasn't, is he going to hire a new one?

**The Prime Minister:** It wasn't.

Q15. [901169] **Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I represent loads of hard-working mums and dads in Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley. Last week, the Leader of the Opposition's campaign chair, Rachel Maclean, said it was not the right decision for the Tories to expand childcare provision. Will the Prime Minister confirm that this Labour Government believe in supporting working families and will work to get them the childcare they need?

**The Prime Minister:** Let me be absolutely clear: this Government are committed to making childcare more affordable and accessible. The Tory party voted against making life easier for working families. They have learned absolutely nothing. We are committed to providing £1.8 billion to expand access across childcare, creating 3,000 new school-based nurseries and family hubs. I am proud that we are taking the country in the right direction.

Q7. [901161] **Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Article 2 of the United Nations genocide convention makes it explicit that genocide is not about numbers; it is about intent. The intent of the Israeli Government and the Israel Defence Forces has been explicit in words and actions over the past 400 days, with more than 45,000 innocent men, women and children killed. On 28 October, the Foreign Secretary denied that a genocide was even taking place and suggested that the Israeli army had not yet killed enough Palestinians to constitute a genocide. Last week at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister stated that he has never referred to the atrocities happening in Gaza as a genocide. Will he share his definition of genocide with the House and state what further action he is prepared to take to save the lives of desperate and starving men, women and children, given that we now hold the presidency of the United Nations Security Council?

**The Prime Minister:** It would be wise to start a question like that by a reference to what happened in October of last year. I am well aware of the definition of genocide, and that is why I have never described this or referred to it as genocide.

**Katie White** (Leeds North West) (Lab): My constituent's daughter, Bethany Rae Fields, was brutally murdered by her ex-boyfriend in 2019, despite raising multiple alarms of her abuse to the police. This week, Bethany's mother Pauline travelled down to Parliament to bring her case to the Minister. Does the Prime Minister agree with Pauline that more needs to be done to shift the culture towards believing victims and reacting fast when they sound the alarm of concern, as one way to reduce violence against women and girls?

**The Prime Minister:** What happened to Bethany is appalling, and my thoughts, as I am sure are those of the whole House, are with her family. We need a culture shift here, and we have committed to halving violence against women and girls in a decade. No Government have ever made that commitment before, and I hope that can be something that is shared across the House, because this is so important. It starts with that central question of belief and confidence: for every woman or young woman who comes forward, there are probably about nine who never had the confidence to come forward, and this starts with belief and the culture that we put in place. We are committed to that, and I invite the whole House to join us on that mission to halve violence against women and girls.

Q9. [901163] **Nigel Farage** (Clacton) (Reform): I am sure the Prime Minister and the whole House would wish to congratulate Donald Trump on his landslide victory last week—[*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I will hear the question.

**Nigel Farage:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Within a couple of days we had learned of a third assassination attempt. Charges have been laid, and behind it is Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Has the time not come to proscribe what is so obviously a terrorist organisation, and in doing so, not just do the right thing, but perhaps mend some fences between this Government and the incoming presidency of Donald Trump, given that the whole of the Prime Minister's Cabinet have been so rude about him over the last few years?

**The Prime Minister:** I am glad to see the hon. Member making a rare appearance back here in Britain. He has spent so much time in America recently that I was half expecting to see him in the immigration statistics when we see the next batch—[*Interruption.*] He may have missed it, but I congratulated the incoming President last week, and we will work with him. The point the hon. Member makes about Iran is very serious, and we will work across the House and with our allies on it. Obviously on the question of proscription, we keep that under review.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's recognition of Islamophobia Awareness Month, and his commitment to supporting Muslim communities. The definition of Islamophobia from the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims is one of the most widely accepted definitions, and I have been discussing its adoption with the Deputy Prime Minister, the Faith Minister, and the Leader of the House. Given recent riots and a doubling of Islamophobic hate crimes over the past decade, will the Prime Minister outline the steps that this Government will take to tackle the issue, and commit to ensuring a clear and effective definition of Islamophobia?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. Whatever the hatred, there has been a rise in the past 12 or so months, and the whole House will join me in saying that we must meet any rise in hatred in whatever form it is, including Islamophobia. We are working with others to take that forward, and I am happy to meet him further on that.

Q10. [901164] **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I was in South Lochaber at the weekend, speaking to pensioners who still cannot understand why the Prime Minister chose to take away their winter fuel payment. One of them remembered from just two years ago the then Leader of the Opposition stating:

"Looking ahead to winter is frightening. I've met pensioners who have no idea how they'll heat their homes."

She asked me to ask the Prime Minister, whatever happened to that guy?

**The Prime Minister:** As the hon. Member knows from previous answers, we have taken tough decisions in this Budget to deal with the situation that we faced. Because of that, we have stabilised the economy, which means that we can commit to the triple lock, and because of the triple lock, pensioners will be better off. I will take no lectures from his party about running the economy; the SNP's record in Scotland is terrible.



**Juliet Campbell** (Broxtowe) (Lab): I welcome the establishment of a flood resilience taskforce, because in my constituency of Broxtowe, unprecedented flooding has affected many of my constituents. There is rising concern and significant financial insecurity for many; they face distress, trauma and fear in their own home. What other measures is the Prime Minister taking to improve flood resilience? What support will be available to my constituents in Broxtowe?

**The Prime Minister:** I know the dreadful impact that flooding has had on my hon. Friend's constituency, including in Storm Henk earlier this year. The last Government left flood defences in the worst condition on record. We are investing £2.4 billion in flood resilience over the next two years, and we have launched a flood resilience taskforce to co-ordinate national and local flood preparation to better protect communities and our economy. *[Interruption.]* Rather than heckling, the Opposition might reflect on the record that they left.

Q11. [901165] **James McMurdock** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): Residents of my constituency of South Basildon and East Thurrock face a triple whammy of council tax increased by 50%, reduced public services, and £1 billion of emergency funding that is being borrowed at 1% above base rate. That 1% is approximately £10 million a year going to the Treasury that could be spent on frontline services in Thurrock. Will the Prime Minister commit to reducing that rate, so that the money can go where it belongs?

**The Prime Minister:** The last Government made life even more difficult for councils needing exceptional financial support by charging a premium on borrowing. That was the wrong decision, and it had a huge impact on vital services. We will take a different approach. We are delivering a real-terms increase in core Government spending power, and that will benefit the hon. Member's constituents.

**Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): The Leader of the Opposition took time at her party's conference to say that

"a little bit of adversity"

in life is good for people's mental health. That approach clearly did not work for the 2 million people stuck on mental health waiting lists because of the last Tory Government. Will the Prime Minister commit to tackling mental health waiting lists in the NHS?

**The Prime Minister:** We obviously recognise the devastating impact that mental health problems have on people's livelihoods. Lord Darzi's report showed that waiting lists are far too long, and that there was a shocking decline in mental health for children under the last Government. We are giving mental health the commitment it needs by recruiting 8,500 mental health workers—they are much-needed—and reforming the Mental Health Act; in my view, that is long overdue.

Q12. [901166] **Alex Brewer** (North East Hampshire) (LD): Chalk stream rivers are rare and have a unique ecology. Most of them are in the UK, and two are in my constituency of North East Hampshire. Last year, chalk stream rivers were hit with 14,000 hours of sewage

discharges, but the previous Government did nothing, despite calls for action from my hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green). Will the Prime Minister introduce a special protection for our chalk stream rivers?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Member for raising this issue. We are committed to the protection and restoration of unique chalk streams. She is right that the destruction of our waterways should never have been allowed, and we have announced immediate action to end this disgraceful behaviour: new powers and tougher penalties, including fines; banning bonuses; and bringing criminal charges against those who persistently break the law. We have also launched a water commission.

**Jo White** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's leadership on an international scale to smash the criminal gangs that smuggle people across the border. This Labour Government have returned more than 9,000 people with no right to be in the UK, which is 20% more than the Conservatives did. Will the Prime Minister confirm that he will continue this trend, and smash the gangs that profit from people's misery?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. The last Government lost control of our borders. In the first six months of this year, small boat arrivals were up by 18% on the same period last year. They spent £700 million returning, what, four volunteers to Rwanda? Since coming into office, we have returned 9,400 people with no right to be here. They talked about getting the flights off; we have got the flights off, including the single biggest deportation flight. That is why we are investing another £75 million in smashing the gangs. We are absolutely determined to have a serious response to a serious question, not a gimmick that achieves absolutely nothing.

Q14. [901168] **Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I am sure that ensuring that every child has access to a great education is a priority for all across the House, and I welcomed the announcement on extra funding for children with special educational needs and disabilities in the Budget. In the Chancellor's speech, she announced a £2.3 billion increase in core spending and £1 billion for SEN. However, the Budget document states that those sums are both from the same pot, in which case that spending was announced twice. Which is correct?

**The Prime Minister:** The Chancellor made this absolutely clear in the Budget. We are putting that huge investment into special educational needs, an issue of concern across the House, because I think all Members recognise the appalling record of the last Government. The appalling state of SEN has been raised by those on the hon. Gentleman's own Benches. I am proud of the money that the Government are putting in where the last Government failed.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): Not a week goes by when my office is not contacted by young people and their families who are being let down by the shocking state of SEN provision locally. In my constituency, I am trying to work across party lines to push both Central Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire councils to do more. I welcome the fantastic news in the Budget about additional



funding, and the subsequent announcements about increased support for mainstream settings, but we will need to do more. Can the Prime Minister assure my constituents that we will not shy away from the whole-system reform needed to finally ensure that every young person has the support that they need to thrive in school?

**The Prime Minister:** We will not shy away from that challenge, because it is far too important for the children, families and communities involved. We will therefore not only put the necessary money in, but look at the reform that is needed alongside that investment, and we will finally fix the problem—another of the problems that we have inherited from the lot opposite.

**Mr Speaker:** Final question: Sir Alec Shelbrooke.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. On 29 November, the House will be asked to consider the Second Reading of one of the most consequential pieces of legislation about the country's make-up. I am genuinely approaching it with

an open mind, but have many concerns. One is the short space of time for debate on that day. Will the Government commit, before 29 November, to two days—16 hours—of protected Government time for the Bill on the Floor of the House, so that we can examine and debate the Bill on Report, which is when much of what we are concerned about can be brought up? Otherwise, people like me may decline it a Second Reading, through fear that we may not be able to debate the issues in full.

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful to the right hon. Member for raising this issue, which is obviously important, and it is an important vote. I know that there are strongly held views on both sides of the debate across the House. That is why there will be a free vote. Every Member needs to decide for themselves how they will vote. I do think that there is sufficient time allocated to it, but it is an important issue.

**Mr Speaker:** That completes Prime Minister's questions. *[Interruption.]* Points of order come after urgent questions and statements.

## Chagos Islands

12.39 pm

**Nigel Farage** (Clacton) (Reform) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if he will make a statement on the transfer of sovereignty of the Chagos islands to Mauritius.

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty)**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Following two years of negotiation under three Prime Ministers, on 3 October the Government secured a deal that will protect the secure operation of the UK-US base on Diego Garcia well into the next century. The Government inherited a situation where that future was under threat. International courts were reaching judgments on the basis that Mauritius had sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago. International organisations were also taking steps not to undermine Mauritian sovereignty claims. That was not sustainable.

The base on Diego Garcia plays a critical role in countering an array of threats to regional and international security. Without legal certainty, the base simply cannot operate effectively. Continued uncertainty would be a gift to our adversaries. That is why the agreement has been welcomed by all parts of the US system, and other critical regional security partners, including India. Agreeing the deal now, on our terms, meant that we were able to secure strong protections that will allow the base to operate as it has done. We have secured a deal that protects our national interests, respects the interests of our partners and upholds the international rule of law. There will be clear commitments in the treaty to robust security arrangements, including arrangements preventing the presence of foreign security forces on the outer islands, so that the base can continue to operate securely and effectively. We would not have signed off on an agreement that compromised any of our security interests, or those of our allies.

The agreement will be underpinned by a financial settlement that is acceptable to both sides, and will underpin a strong, long-term partnership with Mauritius. That was crucial to securing the agreement. The Government will not scrimp on our national security; however, I am sure that the House will understand that it is not normal practice for the UK to reveal the value of payments for military bases anywhere across the globe, because to do so would put at risk their future secure operation.

The deal will also deliver benefits for the Chagossian community, who were removed from the islands in the 1960s and 1970s. I know that the whole House has already expressed, and will join me in again expressing, regret for that shameful episode. Mauritius will now be able to implement a programme of resettlement to the islands, other than Diego Garcia, and we will work together to start a programme of visits for Chagossians to all the islands. The UK will finance a new trust fund for Mauritius to support Chagossians, and will provide additional Government support to those living in the UK. All Chagossians will of course remain eligible for British citizenship and free to make their home in the UK.

We will work with Mauritius to ensure the continued protection of the islands' unique environment, with the shared objective of securing and protecting one of the world's most important marine environments. That will include the establishment of a Mauritius marine protected area. The agreement also shuts down the possibility of the Indian ocean being used as a dangerous illegal migration route to the UK, with Mauritius taking responsible for any future arrivals.

The long-term protection of the base on Diego Garcia has been the shared UK and US priority throughout. This agreement secures its future. We look forward to engaging with the incoming US Administration. I congratulate both President Trump and Dr Ramgoolam on their recent election victories in the US and Mauritius respectively, and we look forward to working with their Governments on this matter. The agreement is in all sides' shared interests, and in our national security interest.

**Nigel Farage**: Mauritius has no legal or historical claim to sovereignty over a group of islands that are 1,300 miles away from it, and the opinion of the International Court of Justice was purely advisory. There is no legal reason why we have to do any of this. I warned the Foreign Secretary six weeks ago in this Chamber that it was an enormous mistake to do this, given that we had a US presidential election coming up on 5 November. Ministers might say to me, "It's okay—the United States is fully in favour." Really? I can tell the House that the incoming national security adviser Mike Waltz has form on this, going right back to when the right hon. Member for Braintree (Mr Cleverly) was doing his best to give away the sovereignty of the Chagos islands; indeed, Mike Waltz wrote to Secretary of State Blinken at the time.

I assure the House, having been in America last week and knowing the incoming US Defence Secretary very well, that there is outright hostility towards this deal. Whatever is said about a lease agreement, these agreements can very easily be broken, as we saw with Hong Kong. Diego Garcia was described to me by a senior Trump adviser as the most important island on the planet for America, so the Minister will find outright hostility.

By the way, what happened to the Chagossian people was truly awful, but they are unanimous in their wish not to live under Mauritian rule; they want to live under British rule because they trust us.

There is no basis for this agreement. If the Government continue with it, they will be at conflict with a country without which we would be defenceless.

**Stephen Doughty**: I am afraid I fundamentally disagree with what the hon. Gentleman said. Let me be clear: this Government inherited a situation whereby the long-term secure operation of this crucial military base—he is right on that one point—was under threat. International courts were reaching judgments and international organisations were taking steps not to undermine Mauritian sovereignty. That threatened the secure and effective operation of the base. In the absence of a negotiated solution, a legally binding decision against the UK seemed inevitable. That would have threatened the secure and effective operation of the base, and that was not sustainable. [*Interruption.*]

On the hon. Gentleman's comments about the incoming US Administration, we very much look forward to working with them, and I am sure that they will be briefed on the full detail of the deal. I am confident that the details of the arrangement will allay any concerns, otherwise we would not have entered into any such arrangement in the first place. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Mr Francois, I welcome you back to the Front Bench, but I do not welcome you shouting from it continuously. Do we understand that we need calm? This is an important subject, so I do not want the rhetoric that is coming from there.

**Stephen Doughty:** Mr Speaker, I have known the right hon. Gentleman a long time, and he knows that he can come and speak to me about these matters at any point.

Let me be clear: we will work very closely with the incoming US Administration, and we are working closely with the current US Administration. This agreement had support across the national security apparatus of the United States. Otherwise, we would never have entered into an arrangement. The previous Government recognised the threats to the long-term operation of the base, which is why they started the negotiations in the first place, but this Government did the deal. Diego Garcia is important, but it is not at risk—it is more secure as a result of the deal. What the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) is suggesting is simply not the case.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Chagossians. What happened to them was completely wrong and shameful—that has been agreed on all sides of the House. I have engaged with the Chagossian community on a number of occasions. He will also recognise that there are a range of views across the Chagossian community, including those who support the deal. We have made sure that their interests are at the heart of the arrangement, whether in the trust fund, the unilateral arrangements, the continued commitment to UK citizenship for Chagossians, their ability to return to visit all the islands or the resettlement programme that Mauritius will restart under the treaty.

I am confident that this deal is the right thing for our national security, for the Chagossian community and for our allies and partners.

**Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): We heard representations from the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) about upholding international law. Does the Minister agree that it is important that the UK fulfils its international law obligations? Does he recognise that in 2021, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea confirmed that Mauritius has sovereignty over the Chagos islands? Does he agree that, notwithstanding that, the deal secures the long-term certainty of the base on Diego Garcia?

**Stephen Doughty:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Agreeing this deal now on our terms means that we have been able to secure protections that will allow the base to operate as it has done into the next century. It settles the historical sovereignty claims in a way that successfully balances our international law obligations with vital UK and US national security requirements.

**Mr Speaker:** I welcome Dame Priti Patel to the Opposition Front Bench.

**Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The world is a more dangerous place than ever before in our lifetimes and this Government have agreed to give away a key strategic asset in the Indian ocean, ending more than 200 years of British sovereignty. It is the wrong decision, and we stand by that completely. A month has gone since the Government's announcement, but we are still in the dark about exactly what they have agreed. That is simply not acceptable. We have no treaty and vital questions remain unanswered. That is unacceptable and the Minister needs to put it right today.

We cannot afford for our military base on Diego Garcia to be compromised in this way. What safeguards will be in place to ensure that no other states can establish themselves or place their assets, in particular strategic assets, on any nearby islands in the archipelago? How does the decision affect the strategic defence review that is under way? How much money will Labour be asking British taxpayers to send to Mauritius each year under the deal, which we do not even know the details of? Which departmental budgets will that come from? What is the total figure? The House expects transparency, including on what taxpayers will be funding. We need to hold the Government to account on this.

Will the Minister please give a cast-iron guarantee that the UK will be able to unilaterally extend the agreement on the military base beyond 99 years? That is all we have heard for now. What will be the mechanism for doing that? This is a crucial piece of scrutiny that we all need to know about, particularly as the Minister raised a point about national security and the national security apparatus agreeing to this arrangement. What discussions has the Foreign Secretary—I know he is not here today—personally undertaken with the Chagossian community, who the Minister will know are beyond distraught about the agreement?

The elections in Mauritius and the United States pose further questions, and it is right that we follow up on them. Labour rushed into the deal just before the Mauritian elections, even though Ministers must surely have realised that a change of Government was a strong possibility. Why did they do that? The Minister needs to be clear. We want to know how the Government are going to engage with the new US Administration. The Opposition oppose the Government's decision and we intend to hold them to account.

**Stephen Doughty:** First, I welcome the shadow Foreign Secretary to her place in this Chamber. We were in a Committee earlier today, but I welcome her to her place. I have always had good engagement with her on issues in the past and she is right to ask important questions, but the first thing I need to do is correct the idea that we are somehow giving up the base. That is exactly the opposite of what we are doing. We are securing the future of the base. The base will continue to operate. It will continue to operate as it has done.

The right hon. Lady asks an important question about security guarantees in relation to the outer islands. There will be clear commitments in the treaty for robust security arrangements, including preventing the presence of foreign security forces on the outer islands. We simply would not have signed off an agreement that



[Stephen Doughty]

compromised any of our security interests or those of our allies. Indeed, this has been discussed not just at a political level in the United States, but at a deep technical level. She will know from her time in government about the nature of the special relationship and the depth of that relationship. That is why we have proceeded only on the basis that we were all satisfied with the arrangements.

The right hon. Lady will be able to scrutinise those arrangements in due course, as will the House, Mr Speaker. The treaty will be presented in the usual way after signature. It will go through the usual process. [Interruption.] She asks when. We have just had the Mauritian election. We will be engaging with the new Administration there and seeking to present the treaty for signature. We will then present it, in all its detail, to the House.

The right hon. Lady asked about an extension period. There is a provision in the treaty for an extension period after the 99-year period.

The right hon. Lady asked about the Chagossians. Again, I gently say that there are a range of views in the Chagossian community. They have been expressed to me on many occasions, both before I came into government and since I have been in government. There is a range of views on the arrangement. We respect all the different views that are out there. We will continue to engage with the Chagossian community, but I am absolutely clear that there are important provisions in the deal that support the Chagossian community: their ability to return to the outer islands, the visits, the trust fund, the unilateral support we will continue to provide, and the fact that Chagossians are welcome to come here to the UK and take up British citizenship, which was an agreement under the previous Government.

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Portsmouth is the home of the Royal Navy, and as the Member for Portsmouth North, I welcome the appointment of Jonathan Powell, who played an important part in negotiating this deal, as National Security Adviser. Does the Minister agree that with his experience in helping to negotiate the Good Friday agreement and his work on some of the world's most complex conflicts, he is uniquely placed to advise the Government on tackling the challenges ahead and to protect the advancement of UK security?

**Stephen Doughty:** I totally agree with my hon. Friend, who I know takes a keen interest in the overseas territories, in particular Gibraltar. I totally agree with her about the new National Security Adviser. He is a remarkable individual with a huge track record in government of making deals and getting things done, which I know is appreciated by our friends on the opposite side of the Atlantic, too. He is somebody who takes the national security of this country extraordinarily seriously, so I completely agree with her characterisation.

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

**Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): Many Chagossians from all over the country gathered at a rally yesterday, where they expressed their concerns about the UK-Mauritius agreement. We reiterate our concerns here today. The exclusion of the voice of the Chagossians

is wrong. It cannot be right, and surely no Member of this House could think it acceptable that the Chagossians are denied the opportunity for self-determination.

Will the Minister update the House to confirm the timescales by which Parliament will have oversight of the final treaty? Will he look again at injecting the voice of Chagossians into the process, even at this late stage? May I also raise the case of the Tamils stranded on Diego Garcia? We welcome recent news reports that they will be airlifted to the UK, but will the Minister update the House on whether that will take place and whether they will be permitted a permanent right to resettlement in the UK?

**Stephen Doughty:** I thank the hon. Gentleman, who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, for his questions. I know that the future of the islands is hugely important to the Chagossian community. I have engaged with the Chagossian community over many, many years and since I have been in government. We have always been clear about the importance of respecting their interests. I have to say, though, that the negotiations were between the UK and Mauritius, as sovereign states, with our priority being to secure the full operation of the base on Diego Garcia. However, it is crucial that we recognise the importance of Chagossian interests within this process and we have done that.

I am confident that when the full deal is presented to Parliament, which it will be in due course, there will be important provisions in there that will reassure members of the Chagossian community. As I mentioned, some of them have already been made public: the ability to visit, the ability to resettle on the outer islands, the UK citizenship guarantees, the trust fund, and, of course, the UK's own support, which is crucial and comes on the back of the support we have provided for some time.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Sri Lankan migrants on Diego Garcia. This Government inherited a deeply troubling situation which remained unresolved under the last Administration for years after the migrants arrived on Diego Garcia, resulting in mounting legal challenges. We have been working at pace to find a solution that protects the welfare of individuals and the integrity of British territorial borders. Due to the exceptional nature of the cases, the Government have taken the decision to relocate a small number of the migrants to the UK, but that is subject to security checks. They will get a short period of permission to enter the UK, when the individuals can consider their personal circumstances and next steps.

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): One of the wonderful things about our Parliament and our democracy is that our citizens can see our proceedings, but so too can our foes. Those who wish us harm and have no good intentions towards us will look across at the Opposition Benches and see that there is not a credible national security team when they are asking questions of this Government.

I want to confine my question to a constituent of mine who has lived in the UK for the last 17 years after leaving the Chagos islands. He is keen to reunite with his family who are now UK citizens, but housing costs are an issue. Will the Minister get back to me with information on whether housing support could be part of the Government's overall support for the Chagossian community?



**Stephen Doughty:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Obviously, I do not know the full details of his constituent's individual case, but if he writes to me, I will of course come back to him in due course.

**Mr James Cleverly** (Braintree) (Con): Can the Minister confirm or deny that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) had any unminuted conversations with Philippe Sands KC about the Mauritian claim over the Chagos islands?

**Stephen Doughty:** The Prime Minister engaged with the former Prime Minister of Mauritius and with the US Administration on these matters. We have engaged with a wide range of partners in these discussions. The right hon. Gentleman is very familiar with them, as the former Foreign Secretary who was part of that process.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will agree with me that, as we discuss the very important issues raised by the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), we must acknowledge that all right hon. and hon. Members are doing what is in the best interests of our country; that right hon. and hon. Members on the Opposition Benches do not have a monopoly on national security and defence; and, indeed, that it is this Government who are reforming and improving our international reputation around the world—our decision on the Chagos islands, which will protect the base and deal with the other issues my hon. Friend has mentioned, is an important part of that.

**Stephen Doughty:** Absolutely. The importance of national security to this Government is at the heart of the missions set out by the Prime Minister, which have been put into practice by the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary and me, along with others across the Government. We would never take decisions that compromised the national security of this country, or indeed that of our allies, and that is why I am confident that this decision is the right one. Let us remember that this process was begun under the last Administration, because they recognised the challenge and recognised that something needed to be done about it.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Given that the Mauritian Government, with whom the Minister was dealing, have failed and are no longer in power, is this not a case of a deal with the wrong people at the wrong time for the wrong reasons, which has abandoned the Chagossians? The Chagossians made it very clear throughout—the fact cannot be misrepresented—that the vast majority wanted to go back, but they also wanted to remain British citizens. Now that we have an incoming Government in America and a new Government in Mauritius, what is the point of continuing with this agreement? We should start again, and recognise that the Chagossians do not want to be Mauritian. They want us to give them their property back, so why do we not just do that, and simplify the whole thing?

**Stephen Doughty:** The right hon. Gentleman knows that the national security interests of this country and, indeed, those of our allies transcend Administrations. We have just had an election as well; his Government started this process, and we are the ones who got it

done. As for Mauritius, we welcome Dr Ramgoolam's election. I understand that he and his Government are to be sworn in over the next few days, and we look forward to working with them to take forward this agreement. He is a friend of the UK and has deep professional and personal connections with it, having studied and worked here. I should also point out that his party, in opposition, made clear that it in no way wanted to contend with the operation of our base on Diego Garcia. We are looking forward to engaging with the new Government in the days to come.

**Chris Curtis** (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): In the spirit of cross-party working, would the Minister like to take this opportunity to thank the previous Conservative Government for starting negotiations on this important matter? They realised then, even if they do not realise it now, its importance to our country's national security.

**Stephen Doughty:** I thank my hon. Friend for his observation. The former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Mr Cleverly), appears to be on his way out, but he recognised, as did many others in the last Administration, that we needed to secure a long-term, sure and legal footing for this base to meet the security needs of ourselves and our allies. We are the Government who came in and got the deal done.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Does the Minister agree that the principal way to defend national security is to stand fast behind the international rules-based system, and that the principal way to do that is to adhere to the rulings of institutions such as the International Court of Justice?

A great deal of concern has been expressed during these exchanges about the sovereign democratic will of the Chagossians. What mechanism will the UK Government put in place to ensure that the House can be confident that the sovereign ambitions of the Chagossians as a people will be respected in this treaty, and not simply sacrificed for convenience?

**Stephen Doughty:** The hon. Gentleman is right about the importance of international law and adherence to it. This Government are committed to the rule of law, including international law. One reason we wanted to get this deal done was to put that base on a secure legal footing, along with our relationships with Mauritius and other states. There has been substantial criticism from other key partners around the world about our failure to reach a settlement, which was having an impact on our interests.

As I have said repeatedly, I have engaged with the Chagossians on many occasions, and we will continue to engage with them. We will continue to listen to the range of views in the community—there are a huge number—and to ensure that their interests are protected, which I am confident that the treaty does.

**Mr Mark Sowards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I know that the Minister is a strong ally and supporter of all our overseas territories, as are this Government. Will he take this opportunity to restate the Government's unconditional commitment to the right of the people of the Falkland Islands and the

[Mr Mark Sewards]

peoples of Gibraltar to self-determine, and will he also confirm that we will continue to work closely with all our overseas territories?

**Stephen Doughty:** I thank my hon. Friend for his important question. I can absolutely confirm that, not least through my own actions and those of my ministerial colleagues. The Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), has visited the Falklands in the last week, where he reiterated our absolute and robust commitment to their self-determination and sovereignty. I was in Gibraltar making the same point just a few weeks ago, and I was in three of our overseas territories last week making exactly the same commitments. This Government are committed to our overseas territories. I look forward to welcoming the leaders to the Joint Ministerial Council next week to say that to them in person.

**Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con):** Once again the Minister has come to the Chamber and said that the last Government started these negotiations. May I remind him that it was the last Government who ended the negotiations, because the Foreign Secretary did not agree with the advisory legal opinion that was given? This Foreign Secretary capitulated in two days.

The Minister has also said that he will not reveal the cost of the deal because the Government do not release information about costs related to overseas bases, but when, on 14 October, my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) asked the Minister for the Armed Forces a question about the total cost related to an overseas base in Kenya, the answer revealed the cost of what the Government were giving to that base. What is so different in this case?

**Stephen Doughty:** There is a very clear difference. That is a training area, not a major base, and I will not go into the details of the operation on that base. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman continues to ask for details relating to a base that is hugely important to our national security, when providing such information would put the security of the base at risk.

**Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab):** I know that the Minister is a strong friend of our overseas territories. Could he explain the importance of putting the US base on a legal footing, and give us a bit more detail about how that will enable us to work with our allies in countering any potential Chinese threat in the region?

**Stephen Doughty:** My hon. Friend has raised an important point, which has been raised in good faith by Conservative Members and, indeed, by others. I am absolutely confident that when the detail of the treaty is provided—along with other technical details, at appropriate levels—it will make clear our commitments to robust security arrangements to deal with the challenge to which he has referred, and that will include preventing the presence of foreign security forces on the outer islands. Let me reiterate that we simply would not have countenanced a deal that would in any way put our national security or that of our allies at risk.

**Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con):** Quite simply, do we have the unilateral right to extend—yes or no?

**Stephen Doughty:** I have made it very clear that we have the right to extend the treaty beyond the 99-year period, and the right hon. Gentleman will be able to scrutinise the detail of that in due course.

**Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab):** It is difficult to fathom concerns raised by the Opposition about the consequences of governmental transition, as it was the former Conservative Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Mr Cleverly), who said, when leading negotiations with Mauritius:

“Our primary objective is to ensure the continued effective operation of our defence facility on Diego Garcia.”—[*Official Report*, 13 June 2023; Vol. 734, c. 151.]

Does my hon. Friend agree that this Government have now delivered that, and should the Conservatives not be welcoming the agreement?

**Stephen Doughty:** Let me first thank my hon. Friend for his service for our country and its national security—and, indeed, thank all new Members who have served in our armed forces. I completely agree with his comments: we are indeed protecting our national security and putting matters on a secure footing

**Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con):** Alexander Downer, a former Australian Foreign Minister, a former high commissioner to this country, a former United Nations special adviser on Cyprus and a good friend of this country, says that the surrender of the Chagos Islands is

“symptomatic of a country that no longer has geopolitical perspective.”

What is the Minister's response to Mr Downer's remarks, and does he agree with his comment that the last Labour Government were prepared to capitulate on the two Cypriot sovereign base areas, Dhekelia and Akrotiri? Who would have thought it? Is not the Chagos surrender just same old Labour—strong on post-colonial guilt and weak on safety, security and stability?

**Stephen Doughty:** I do not recognise those comments in the slightest, not least because we have repeatedly made clear our commitment to our overseas territories: to the Falklands, to Gibraltar, and to the sovereign base areas in Cyprus, which, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows, are protected under the 1960 treaty. I have made statements to that effect. We are clear about our support for those territories and their importance to us. This is not about handing something over; it is about Diego Garcia being on a secure footing, with our military base and our presence secure for the future.

**Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind):** The expulsion of the Chagossian people from both Diego Garcia and the archipelago was an act of wanton brutality by the British forces at the time. The Chagos Islanders have fought a doughty battle for more than 40 years in courts all over the world, at the United Nations and in courts in this country, and they have demanded their right to return. All along, they have been determined to achieve that right, and they deserve our congratulations on that. Their right to return must be recognised, and

international judicial systems have all shown that the Chagos Islands should clearly be part of Mauritius. Therefore, returning the islands to Mauritius is obviously the correct thing to do.

Can the Minister assure me that the Chagossians' right to return to the archipelago, Peros Banhos and the other islands will be accompanied by the right to have a presence on, or to visit, Diego Garcia itself? It is perfectly possible that such things could be arranged. I ask him not to send us down the road of rebuilding the British empire, which is apparently what the Conservative party and Reform want to do. We do not live in an age of empire; we live in an age of the right of people to live their lives according to international law, and that is what is on offer.

**Stephen Doughty:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I have been very clear that the way the UK removed the Chagossians from the archipelago in the 1960s and '70s was wrong. I know that there is agreement across the House on this issue, and we are committed to building a relationship with the community that is built on respect and on acknowledgement of the wrongs of the past.

The right hon. Gentleman asks a very technical question. He is absolutely right to say that Chagossians will have the right to visit all the islands. Given the sensitivity of the facilities on Diego Garcia, he will understand that some procedures are in place around that, but it will be possible to have visits. We hope to be able to announce the scheme for that in due course next year. Most importantly, the treaty allows for resettlement of the outer islands by Mauritius.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) about incoming Administrations in Mauritius and the United States, our allies in the United States will clearly have serious concerns about what the proposals are. Will the Minister set out when the treaty is expected to be signed and, indeed, whether this House will get a say over whether that treaty should be signed before it is cast into law?

**Stephen Doughty:** As someone who has been in the House a long time, the hon. Gentleman will be aware of the procedures for dealing with treaties in this place. The treaty will be signed, it will come through this place, and it will have the appropriate scrutiny—it is only right that it does and that questions are asked. I am absolutely confident that when the full details of the treaty are provided to the incoming Administration in the United States, they will be absolutely confident that it meets US and UK national security interests and is in the mutual benefit of all parties involved.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): If the incoming President Trump Administration confirm that they are against this dreadful deal, will the Government stop negotiations and apologise to this House, or will they try to force it upon our most important international strategic partner?

**Stephen Doughty:** The hon. Gentleman will surely know that the convention is that we deal with one Administration at a time. We have very positive and warm engagement with President-elect Trump and Vice

President-elect Vance's incoming Administration. We look forward to discussing these matters with them, and we will engage with the United States in the usual way. We are absolutely clear that this treaty is in the UK-US national security interests. It meets the security concerns, and it puts the base on a secure footing into the next century.

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): Can the Minister explain why the Government rushed into this deal so that it could be completed just before the Mauritian election? Is it proper for the British Government to give diplomatic kudos to a party in a foreign election?

**Stephen Doughty:** I completely reject those comments. Given that the previous Government spent over two years engaging in multiple rounds of negotiations in preparing the basis on which we got a deal done, the idea that we rushed into something is simply not true. It was not done in a rush. We are getting the job done, and keeping our national security and our interests secure.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister's answers have not been what we have sought from him, so I will ask my question in a different way. Does he acknowledge the feelings of the Chagossians, who have peacefully protested about having their sovereignty stripped from them behind their backs? Does he recognise that the deal struck with China over Hong Kong has not been respected, and that our withdrawal has left the people of Hong Kong saying that they have been abandoned? That should serve as a warning. Will the Minister rethink the decision and respect the wishes of the Chagossians?

**Stephen Doughty:** The hon. Gentleman knows that I have a great deal of respect for him on these matters, and for his care for people and human rights around the world. I am very clear that the treaty and the deal respect the rights and interests of the Chagossians, and we have sought to put them at the heart of the arrangements. I have engaged with many Chagossians, who have a range of views, as we have heard today. It is absolutely clear to me that we need to put their interests at the heart of the deal, and we have done that. I am confident that when they look at the detail, they will see very positive outcomes for them and their communities, and we will provide that detail to the House in due course.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Points of order come after urgent questions and statements, unless they are directly relevant to the UQ or statement. Is the point of order directly relevant to the urgent question?

**James Cartlidge:** Yes, very much so.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Go ahead.

**James Cartlidge:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Obviously, the issue of cost is of huge importance, because it is public money, and the Opposition think that the public should know about the cost involved in this agreement. The Minister said to my hon. Friend the Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) that the Government do not give out the figure because they do



[James Cartlidge]

not state the cost of overseas bases. My hon. Friend pointed out that the Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), has clearly stated the cost of the base in Kenya. The Foreign Office Minister said that that is only a training base, but I can confirm to the House that back in November 2022, James Heappey, the then Minister for the Armed Forces, stated the cost of running the base in Akrotiri to the then Member for East Lothian, and that is not a training base at all. Mr Heappey gave three years' worth of figures. Such a request is therefore clearly not unprecedented and it is an extremely important point of public interest, because this is public money. How can we hold the Government to account if they will not tell us what they will pay to rent back the base that we already own?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** That is not a matter for the Chair, but the hon. Member has put his robust point of order on the record.

## Future of the Post Office

1.17 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** With permission, I will make a statement on the Post Office. Frankly, the Government inherited a Post Office that is simply not fit for purpose, following disinterest from the previous Government, a toxic culture in head office and years of under-investment.

Our top priority remains delivering redress to those affected by the Horizon scandal. We have already taken significant steps to increase the payment of redress, which has nearly doubled under this Government. Let me be clear with the House, though. There are still complex cases to resolve, and we have identified gaps in the compensation process, but we are beginning to make progress. As of 31 October, £438 million has been paid to over 3,100 claimants. In July, we launched the new Horizon convictions redress scheme for victims whose convictions were overturned by legislation, and we have announced our intention to set up an appeals system for the much-criticised Horizon shortfall scheme.

We were clear in our manifesto that we will work to strengthen the post office network in consultation with postmasters, trade unions and customers. The post office network provides critical services that are valued by communities across the whole of the UK. Their essential services go beyond post; they provide access to cash, banking and other financial services too. This Government recognise that access to cash remains particularly important to millions of people across the UK. Through its network of 11,500 branches across the UK, the Post Office continues to provide vital banking services to communities and businesses alike through the banking framework, and to protect access to cash.

I know how highly this House rightly values postmasters and what they provide day in and day out to the communities they serve, but we have to recognise that the Post Office is far from perfect. We have seen this from the evidence given at the inquiry. It is clear that there needs to be a significant cultural change at the Post Office to ensure that it genuinely prioritises the needs of postmasters and delivers customers' needs far into the future. It is also clear that more needs to be done to rebuild trust within the business and with the public who depend on its services. It is also no secret that the business is facing commercial challenges. Nearly half of its branches are not profitable or only make a small profit from the Post Office business, postmaster pay has not increased materially for a decade, and the company has a high cost base and needs to transform its IT system.

Earlier today, Nigel Railton set out his ambition for the future of the Post Office, in his role as its chair. Postmasters have to be placed front and centre of the Post Office, and we agree that the culture of Post Office headquarters, in particular, needs to change fundamentally to deliver that. As part of this, the Post Office plans to reduce central costs and look seriously at other ways to deliver efficiencies, which should enable real-terms increases in postmaster pay.

Mr Railton's ambitions are a new deal for postmasters that puts postmasters at the heart of the Post Office. There will be stronger postmaster engagement in the



running of the business. As part of this, a new postmaster panel will be established to enable current postmasters to work with the company to improve the support and training provided to postmasters. The Post Office will also set up a new consultative council that will work with the Post Office's senior management on how these new plans are taken forward, to provide genuine challenge and maintain focus on the needs of postmasters. Mr Railton's plan seeks to make changes to the business, with the ambition of significantly increasing postmaster remuneration, and it sets out an intention to transform the service and support that postmasters receive from the Post Office.

No decisions to close any or all of the remaining directly managed branches have been taken. The Post Office will continue to deliver on the 11,500 minimum branches requirement set by Government. We have made it clear to the Post Office that we expect it to consult postmasters, trade unions and other stakeholders before any individual decisions are taken. Aspects of the plans are also subject to Government funding and the outcomes of the upcoming spending review.

Lastly, we have already set out our plan to publish a Green Paper to consult the public on the long-term future of the Post Office, not least on how it should be governed after a decade of decline. Doing nothing at the Post Office is simply not an option. There is more work to be done, but there has to be change. I commend this statement to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the shadow Minister.

1.22 pm

**Andrew Griffith** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and for sharing an advance copy with me. Let me add from the Opposition Benches that the victims of the Horizon IT scandal deserve full redress and I welcome the efforts to hasten the roll-out of the payments being made, building on the work of my excellent hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I note that we were promised an update on that particular matter by the Government in mid-November. I am not sure whether that was what the Minister was doing today, but please can he undertake to give this House regular updates on such an important matter?

We also welcome the increased focus on postmasters. That is absolutely right. It is, however, with regret that we learn today that the Post Office feels it has no choice but to begin the process of making radical decisions to reduce costs. How has this come about? In common with many other town centre enterprises, the Post Office's costs are skyrocketing. Business rates are going up, national insurance contributions are going up, the threshold at which national insurance becomes payable is going down and its obligations around the minimum wage are going up.

There is a direct line of sight connecting today's announcement and the Chancellor's Budget, yet the Minister did not mention that once in his statement. The chairman of the Post Office himself said in his speech this morning that those changes have made business more difficult for Post Office branches. That is something for Labour Members to consider. Can the Minister guarantee that the Budget has had no impact

on this decision? Alternatively, since that is not the case, does he acknowledge that this was the inevitable consequence of the burdens that his Government are placing on businesses, large and small?

Will the Minister tell us when he first knew of the plans set out by the Post Office today and whether he approved the chairman's statement? The Post Office chairman has made it clear that these plans are subject to Government funding, so can the Minister make a commitment from the Dispatch Box today that that funding will indeed be coming, and that we will not face six months of uncertainty while those negotiations continue? Did his Government do an impact assessment to determine the cost of the Budget measures on the Post Office and other local services? If they did that impact assessment, will they publish it, and if not, why not? Were they worried that the Post Office would not like the result? The measures in the Government's Budget were clearly, as we see here today, a jobs tax. After today's impact on 100 high streets, will the Minister go back to the Chancellor and ask her to nix the NICs increase?

This news is yet another pasting in the onslaught on many rural communities. Thousands of our constituents in communities up and down the country will be waiting in trepidation today to discover the fate of their local post office. Those who rely on their post office are often the most vulnerable in society. What guarantees can the Minister provide that, unlike the family farm tax, this is not a further assault on rural communities from this Government? It was under the last Government that we entered into a new partnership with the Post Office to help millions of people to access Government services and support online, enabling them to visit a post office to confirm their identity in person. That guaranteed to those without the internet that they would not be left behind. Can the Minister confirm that there will be no withdrawal of Government services currently provided through the Post Office?

For many, post offices also provide valuable, vital banking services. I am proud of the role the last Government undertook to launch banking hubs across the country. It was a privilege to see the focus of my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), working in the Treasury Committee to drive forward that lifeline for communities from Saltash to Kilkeel. It was encouraging to read in Nigel Railton's speech this morning that the Post Office has committed to the significant increase in the number of banking hubs to 500 by 2030. We welcome that. However, the devil is in the detail, especially where this Government are concerned. Has the Minister engaged with colleagues in the Treasury to discuss the impact of today's news on the banking framework negotiations, which are essential to underwrite that roll-out of banking hubs? What support will the Government offer to secure the future of more banking hubs in areas that need them most?

Despite the fact that no one around the Cabinet table has ever set up a business, I would have thought it would be obvious that placing unaccountable burdens on business would push up the cost of wages and employment, and that if they introduced a jobs tax, that would be the consequence. However, that is exactly what this Government have tried to do, and here we are, no less than two weeks later, with our high streets facing the devastating consequences of the Government's decisions.

**Gareth Thomas:** I am grateful to the shadow Minister for some of his comments. I am happy to confirm that I will keep the House updated on work around the future of the Post Office, as well as, even more importantly, on the work to ensure that all those sub-postmasters who were the victims of the Horizon scandal get full and fair redress. On that point, I should say at the outset that I have met a series of sub-postmasters who were victims of the Horizon scandal, and each of them certainly left their mark on me. Their stories will stay with me for a very long time, and in that regard I am sure that I speak for the whole House, given the conversations that Members have had with individual sub-postmasters in their constituencies. I am therefore acutely aware of my responsibility, and the Government's responsibility more generally, to follow through on our commitment to speed up redress.

The number of cases that have been settled with full and fair compensation has nearly doubled in the four months since we came into government, compared with the four months before. We have taken a series of additional steps to try to make it easier for sub-postmasters who were the victims of the scandal to get full and fair redress quickly, not least by fixing some payments for those applying under the Horizon shortfall scheme and similarly fixing some payments under the Horizon convictions redress scheme, which we launched back in July.

The hon. Gentleman's wider point about the Budget's impact on the high street sounded like he was replaying his lines from last week's Budget debate. I recall him being the right-hand man to Kwasi Kwarteng, who helped to do huge damage to businesses up and down the country and helped to drive interest rates to a 16-year high, so I gently suggest that he has more work to do to be convincing on his support for businesses.

I hope the hon. Gentleman is willing to take responsibility for another impact, because more than 9,500 bank branches have closed over the past 14 years, which has had a considerable impact on the future of the high street. With Nigel Railton, our plan is to improve banking services and to roll out banking hubs, which I hope will make a significant difference.

On the Budget more generally, given the financial mess in which the Conservatives left the country and given the lack of money set aside for Horizon compensation, I think the hon. Gentleman should be a little more honest to this House about his responsibility for the scale of the mess we inherited.

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

**Liam Byrne** (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): Today is the last day of the Horizon inquiry. I look forward to working with you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and with colleagues across the House to explore appropriate sanctions for those who clearly misled us as the scandal unfolded. I look forward to seeing the Minister and the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander), before the Committee on Tuesday 19 November to explore how redress payments can be paid faster.

It is surely right that we aim to grow the top line of Post Office businesses, which has to mean that high street banks contribute more to the core business. What steps can the Minister take to ensure this happens?

**Gareth Thomas:** I welcome that the Committee's first act is to look at redress for sub-postmasters who were victims of the Horizon scandal. I will happily appear next week to talk through where we are on compensation payments.

My right hon. Friend is right to say that one of the bright spots in the Post Office's future lies in banking, and the continuing commitment of its sub-postmasters is the brightest spot. With the right support from the financial services industry, there is clearly more that the Post Office could offer on the high street through banking hubs and the post office network. We will work with the Post Office, and the banks have a particular responsibility, given how many bank branches have closed, to work constructively with the Post Office to improve the banking offer on the high street.

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

**Sarah Gibson** (Chippenham) (LD): I also thank the Minister for his statement.

Post Office branches across the UK are a vital part of our local communities and high streets, with millions of people depending on them, especially in more rural areas of the south-west, such as my constituency. The news that 115 branches and around 1,000 jobs could be at risk is extremely concerning. I am pleased to hear the Minister's reassurances, but the organisation needs reform. Local communities cannot be left without the essential services that post offices offer, especially as we see high street banks disappear. The Government must guarantee that local services and post office jobs are protected.

We also urge the Government to take action to set the Post Office on a sustainable footing for the long term. The Liberal Democrats have put forward a proposal for mutualisation of the Post Office, which would give sub-postmasters more independence and control. We should encourage post offices to play a more active role in our local economies, acting, as Members have mentioned previously, as community banking hubs and Government services hubs.

These post offices are often the only non-digital places where a local community can access Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency services and passport services, or to prepay for their utility bills. These post offices are essential for some of our more elderly and vulnerable residents.

The Government have announced that they are looking into broader reform of the organisation, and they will produce a Green Paper next year. Will the Minister assure the House that these proposals, including mutualisation and strengthening the services provided by post offices, will be properly considered so that we can ensure post offices are fit for the future?

Madam Deputy Speaker, I have a final quick point—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. You only have two minutes.

**Gareth Thomas:** I underline that no decision has been taken on any or all the directly managed branches. However, these branches cost significantly more to run than those run by franchisees. We have made it clear to the Post Office that, as it reviews these costs, it must talk to sub-postmasters, trade unions and other stakeholders.

The more general point about ensuring that people in rural areas can access a post office branch is well understood within the Department and across Government. There has been no decision to change the commitment to run 11,500 branches or to change the level of Government funding provided to run the network across the country.

I agree with the hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) that the Post Office can do more. That is one reason why we committed in opposition—and are delivering in government—to rolling out more banking hubs, which will be run by the Post Office. She made an interesting point about digital exclusion and the Post Office's potential to do more in that regard.

Lastly, given my background, I am interested in mutualisation, but I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that there are significant challenges in determining whether mutualisation is a realistic possibility at this stage. One reason for our commitment to publishing a Green Paper next year is to explore these issues in more detail.

**Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is insistent that the Post Office continues to play a vital role in our communities. Given that the Horizon inquiry finishes today, will he say more about how sub-postmasters will now be considered by the Post Office in a way that, frankly, they have never been before?

**Gareth Thomas:** Each time I have met a sub-postmaster who was a victim of the Horizon scandal, I have been shocked by the way the Post Office treated them. I am sure other Members share that sentiment, having spoken to sub-postmasters in their constituencies who were also victims of the scandal.

The Post Office's culture must change fundamentally. I welcome Mr Railton's plan to set up both a consultative council, to work with sub-postmasters on the Post Office's commercial future, and a postmaster panel to provide more training and support for postmasters. One of the challenges for the Government, which is why we have committed to publishing a Green Paper, is to think through how we lock in that culture change. My hon. Friend, and indeed other Members, will be very welcome to engage with us during that Green Paper process.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): There is a massive difference between Crown post offices and sub-post offices. Crown post offices are more expensive to run: they offer a bigger range of services and they are dedicated to the work of the Post Office. Given those costs, the Minister will know that several Crown post offices in his constituency and in mine are under threat. Will he give a commitment to the House that none of those Crown post offices will be downgraded before the Green Paper is issued and the future of the Post Office is decided?

**Gareth Thomas:** As I have already made clear, no decisions have been taken to close any directly managed branch. There is a need to look at the costs that the Post Office incurs going forward, in order to make it fit for purpose over the next five to 10 years. As a result, we will need to look at the future of directly managed branches, but only once Post Office managers have talked seriously with sub-postmasters, trade unions and

other key stakeholders, as we have made clear to the Post Office. That is the right way to proceed. We have also made clear we will not change the commitment to provide 11,500 branches, which will ensure everybody continues to have good access to a Post Office branch in every part of the country.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): During the last Parliament, some time before the Liberal Democrats took up the issue, I met with my constituent, Richard Trinder, the sub-postmaster at Handsworth post office, and, online, with some of his colleagues from across the country. They raised the issue of mutualisation. I brought that up with the previous Post Office Minister, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who gave the matter positive consideration and said he would support it. I note that my hon. Friend the Minister has said exactly the same today. I know it will be some time before we get the fundamentals of the Post Office sorted out, but will the Minister say how he will engage with sub-postmasters? They are key to the issue. We need to work and look with them at how mutualisation might work, and what sort of structures they would like to see created that can make it work positively, going forward.

**Gareth Thomas:** I welcome my hon. Friend's question. We need to take a number of steps in order to see mutualisation as a realistic way forward. In the first instance, there has to be a sustained change in Post Office culture about how sub-postmasters are treated. On that, the establishment of the postmaster panel and a consultative council, announced by the chair of the Post Office, Nigel Railton, are significant steps forward. I hope the sub-postmasters in my hon. Friend's constituency will genuinely engage with those bodies. I do not think we can impose mutualisation; it must come up from the grassroots, with the Government being willing to look at that option. The changes that Post Office senior management is looking to make are a good first step in their own right, and have the potential for future positive governance change in the long run. I genuinely encourage my hon. Friend and his sub-postmasters to engage in the Green Paper process.

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): One of the post offices on today's list of potential closures is in Grimsby, where many of my constituents work and run businesses. The Minister rightly says that Crown post offices are more costly. I can assure him that the one in Grimsby, for example, could easily operate in much smaller premises or in premises shared with other businesses in the commercial centre of the town. Will the Minister give an assurance that he will ensure the Post Office looks at operating out of alternative premises, and cuts its costs before considering closures?

**Gareth Thomas:** We have made it clear to the Post Office that it has to talk to sub-postmasters, stakeholders and the trade unions about the costs associated with directly managed branches. We are committed to the requirement to ensure there is easy access to a post office branch for every community, up and down the country. We want the Post Office to continue to talk to people who want to run post offices in their communities, and we continue to encourage it to do so.



**Clive Efford** (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I am a veteran of virtually every debate, urgent question and statement on this issue over more years than I dare to mention. I welcome the statement by my hon. Friend the Minister, but it is disappointing to read some of the comments about the process for sub-postmasters to apply for compensation. We hear about people who have been repeatedly asked for the same information time and again. They are being asked to provide information that is 20 years old and to respond to questions they cannot answer because the Post Office has confiscated the documents and not returned them. The solicitor who represents those postmasters says that the system is designed to wear them down. I gently ask the Minister, what we can do to improve this process for the postmasters?

**Gareth Thomas:** My hon. Friend makes a strong and compelling case. The criticisms that he has just articulated about the compensation process are ones I have heard directly from victims of the Horizon scandal and their legal representatives. We are looking at a series of further things that we can do to improve the compensation process. We have moved more staff in the group litigation order compensation process to help speed up redress for sub-postmasters in that scheme, whose remaining cases are more complex. Perfectly reasonably, people want to see them compensated as quickly as possible. I am optimistic that for claims that come into the GLO scheme before Christmas, we will see significant redress delivered to victims of the Horizon scandal by March.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If sub-post offices are so much cheaper to run than Crown post offices, the Minister may wish to reflect on the fact that that is probably down to the level of remuneration for sub-postmasters. Notwithstanding what he says about no decisions having been made, it would be reassuring to those who rely on post offices and the staff who work in them, including in Kirkwall, which is on the list of those to be considered for closure, if they could be told when that decision will be made. When the Minister talks about consulting postmasters, trade unions and other stakeholders, are we safe to assume that “other stakeholders” include communities and customers? They will be looking for the full range of services and adequate physical space in which to access them.

**Gareth Thomas:** The right hon. Gentleman is right to bring the House’s attention back to the issue of sub-postmaster pay: there has been no material improvement in sub-postmaster pay for over a decade. If we are to see sub-postmasters genuinely treated better in the future, addressing the issue of pay is fundamental. I welcome the focus on that by the chair of the Post Office, Nigel Railton, in his speech today. I gently re-emphasise to the right hon. Gentleman that we remain committed to the Government requirement to deliver 11,500 branches, to ensure that every community has easy access to the post office branch network. Communities will absolutely need to be involved in any decisions about individual branches.

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Acton lost its well used and still much missed post office in 2018, but it is home to the first ever urban Post Office-run banking hub. The trend is to co-locate services, but that seems to have drawn a blank—there are too

many onerous parts to it, and businesses do not want it. So could the Minister help me investigate ways to merge the two services? The banking hub is the natural home for post office services, as it is owned by the Post Office, and, as a neighbouring MP, he could visit to cut the ribbon when we finally get postal services back to Acton, where they belong.

**Gareth Thomas:** My hon. Friend has always been a great champion of her constituency. I have visited the banking hub in Acton in a previous life, before the general election. I would be very happy to revisit the post office. I hear her message about co-location and I assure her I will look at that. I am sure she will continue to press me on the future of banking hubs in Acton.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I welcome the Minister’s statement and his assertion that the Post Office is a central part of our community. The previous administration of the Post Office seemed to glory in selling off Crown post offices and reducing the service for all of us. Earlier, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said that there should be no more closures of Crown post offices. Can the Minister commit to that, and, in the consultation process, consider reopening post offices or extending the Crown post office network to ensure that a variety of services are on offer, and that the post office is central to the life of our high streets and communities all over the country and can play a huge role in the regeneration of our town centres?

**Gareth Thomas:** My right hon. Friend is right to stress the importance of post office branches to the future of all our communities. In that regard, work is required from trade unions and others on highlighting the importance of banking services. I wish that work had been given more attention by my predecessor. *[Interruption.]* With due respect to those on the Opposition Front Bench who are heckling me, it has fallen to this Government to roll out banking hubs in a more significant way. On my right hon. Friend’s more general point about directly managed branches, as I have already said to the House, given that they cost significantly more to run, it is right that we look at those costs. No individual decisions have been taken as yet, and we have made it clear to the Post Office that it needs to consult directly with sub-postmasters, trade unions and other stakeholders.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The Post Office Horizon scandal is probably one of the greatest miscarriages of justice in our history, and I congratulate the Minister on the progress that the Government have made in speeding up compensation payments to postmasters. There was also a huge failure of IT—a failure in IT procurement, IT deployment and IT management—which has undermined public confidence in technology. What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that Fujitsu is held accountable, that the lessons are learned, and that, in the future, post offices have the fantastic technology that they need to support them in their important community role?

**Gareth Thomas:** My hon. Friend makes a crucial point about the future of the Post Office—we must get right the technology that sub-postmasters are expected to use. There were serious problems and delays in the previous Government’s efforts to find a replacement for Horizon. We have had to bring in additional consultants



to work with the Post Office to bring forward a proper replacement. More generally, on Fujitsu, we expect the Horizon inquiry to bring forward a view about the accountability of particular organisations and particular individuals. We will look at what Sir Wyn's inquiry recommends and then make appropriate decisions on those issues.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): We are deeply alarmed that Kendal Crown post office appears on this list. Three years ago, the previous Government and the previous administration of Post Office Ltd also threatened Kendal Crown post office with closure. We won our campaign to save it, in part because Post Office Ltd conceded that there was not enough space in WH Smith in Kendal to accommodate the post office. That has not changed. Royal Mail may also lose its Kendal sorting office as a consequence of the closure. That has not changed either. What has changed is that two more high street banks—Halifax and Lloyds—have deserted Kendal town centre on the basis, they claim, that the post office down the road will be able to take up the slack. Is this not the time to give guarantees to post offices such as the one in Kendal that they will remain a Crown office for the foreseeable future to support our town and our economy?

**Gareth Thomas:** I say gently to the hon. Member that I absolutely recognise his point about the role that bank branches play in communities such as Kendal and about their retreat from our high streets. The banks have a responsibility to work with the Post Office to make sure that communities can have access to the banking services that they need, particularly those offered through the post office. That is one reason why we want to significantly expand the number of banking hubs. On the hon. Member's point about the post office in Kendal, I simply underline the fact that no decisions have been made about Kendal or any other individual directly managed branch. We expect the Post Office to talk to sub-postmasters, trade unions and other stakeholders about this process, but genuinely I say to him that there are significant additional costs associated with the directly managed branches and it is right that the Post Office looks at that as well.

**Jon Trickett** (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): When the Minister said that the Post Office was not fit for purpose, it was hard not to agree with him, given the elite contempt that the organisation has shown for the people who worked for it. It dripped with contempt for ordinary folk. When the Minister meets the new management, will he bear in mind the experience of my constituents? I have 23 former mining villages, with chronic poverty throughout. One after another, the banks have withdrawn from every village and small township in our area. We have 20,000 people without a car and—quite honestly—a crap bus service. Many do not have access to the internet either. The only lifeline that they have is the post offices. Will the Minister ensure that there are no further closures from those villages—a withdrawal by the market or by the state—which worked so hard to create the wealth of our country in the last century?

**Gareth Thomas:** I am acutely aware of the responsibility of Government to ensure that every community has access to a post office branch. That is why we are

continuing to provide a £50 million subsidy to the Post Office to maintain the network going forward. It is also why we think the Post Office should do more when it comes to providing banking services—it is one of the potential areas for it to grow its business. In that regard, given the retreat of bank branches from constituencies such as my hon. Friend's, we absolutely think that the banks should work directly with the Post Office to improve the banking offer in all our communities.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** It would help if the Minister occasionally looked at the Chair and kept his answers short so that we can get everybody in.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): In my constituency, there is real concern about the loss of more rural and village branches. Can the Minister give us some assurance that he will do everything that he can to preserve this vital link and that he will look at how the Post Office can operate more like a commercial franchise operator, which would support and help postmasters to really maximise their business?

**Gareth Thomas:** Absolutely. I recognise that the Post Office has a particularly responsibility to work with sub-postmasters who provide a post office service in rural communities. It is one reason why we remain committed to the requirement to provide 11,500 branches across the UK. One key change that we need to see in the Post Office, and one reason why I welcome the commitments in Sir Nigel Railton's plans today, is the commitment to a consultative council. That will, I hope, help to ensure that the voices of rural sub-postmasters and sub-postmasters more generally are heard much more directly by senior management. I also welcome the idea of a postmaster panel to provide support to sub-postmasters in general, but, in the context of this question, to rural sub-postmasters in particular.

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, his actions on the Horizon scandal, and his commitment to the service that the Post Office provides. I also note that the list of 115 proposed closures contains Cosham in my constituency. It is shocking that the Opposition blame this Government for this, given that, under the Conservatives, closure after closure of high street banks in Cosham made post office services even more vital to our community. How will the Minister ensure that postmasters, employees and community voices are heard in the discussions about retaining this vital branch in Cosham, and about the future development and working together of our high streets, banks and post offices?

**Gareth Thomas:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. I hope I can reassure her that when we publish our Green Paper on the future of the Post Office next year, I will welcome the voices of sub-postmasters from Portsmouth, as well as from the rest of the country; that will help us to think through longer-term questions around the future of the Post Office. As I have already underlined a number of times, no specific decisions have been taken about individual directly managed branches. We expect the Post Office to

[Gareth Thomas]

not only look at all its costs going forward but, crucially, consult with sub-postmasters, trade unions and other stakeholders.

**Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): People in my constituency and across Scotland want a post office network from which they can access essential government services, such as their pensions. We frequently hear in this House about the ever-increasing number of bank closures. The minimum of 11,500 post office branches is welcome, but I have heard little from the UK Government about individual branches, other than that there will be consultation. We need more than that; we need guarantees. People across Scotland really want to know what the Government will do to step up. More than 100 closures were announced today. Did the Government play any role at all in that? If not, why were those closures not delayed until after the Green Paper was published?

**Gareth Thomas:** Perhaps the hon. Gentleman did not fully hear my answer. There have been no decisions to close any individual directly managed branch. As I have said, significant additional costs come with running a directly managed branch, as opposed to a post office franchise, and it is right that the Post Office look at those costs. To make a similar point to that raised by the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), we recognise the responsibility to provide Post Office services to every community in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, so that communities can have easy access to post offices. That has not changed and will not change.

**Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I am very pleased to hear my hon. Friend's statement, and to have this discussion about the important role that post offices play in the operation of banking hubs. Our banking hub in Ware is incredibly important to our community, and I thank him for visiting its temporary site earlier this year. Will he commit to returning there with me when it finds its permanent site, hopefully in the very near future?

**Gareth Thomas:** I can assure my hon. Friend that I will happily come back to visit his constituency when the banking hub there has a permanent home. I would be delighted to.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): Post offices offer more than the sum of their parts, and their loss is felt keenly when branches close, as two have done recently in my constituency, on High Lane and on the Fiveways Parade in Hazel Grove. In both cases, the postmasters felt no longer able to continue in the role, at least in part for commercial reasons. Will the Government take this opportunity to look at strengthening the role of post offices, so that they offer even more local services, and at opening up new funding opportunities to keep these vital services in our communities?

**Gareth Thomas:** The situation the hon. Lady describes is exactly why I welcome the fact that the new management of the Post Office is putting the issue of sub-postmaster pay front and centre in its thinking. If we do not do something to shift sub-postmaster pay upwards, we will see more sub-postmasters making the sorts of decisions that she describes. We must do something urgently to

address this. The Post Office management and chair are rightly homing in on that question as fundamental to the future of the Post Office. As I have underlined, I think there is more that the Post Office could do on banking; that view is certainly shared by the Post Office senior management team, and we are working directly with them to see what more can be done.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** If everybody gives short questions—and short answers, Minister—we can get this done in the next 15 minutes.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): My constituents in Crowthorne are rightly proud of our high street, but as there is no direct access on that street to banking services or a post office branch, they struggle to access vital services. Does the Minister agree that today's announcement highlights the need to roll out more banking hubs, while setting out a viable future for post offices, so that communities such as mine can access the vital services they need?

**Gareth Thomas:** I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to see a faster roll-out of banking hubs. Given that the Conservative party sat back and did nothing while 9,500 bank branches closed, the urgency of the task of rolling out banking branches and improving the banking offer through the post office is acutely felt by my Department.

**Dr Kieran Mullan** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The post office in Bexhill provides vital banking and other services to my constituents, and I have already been contacted by people concerned about its possible closure. Can the Minister ensure that the consultations he keeps mentioning include local communities and service users, and can he guarantee, given Labour's manifesto commitment to strengthen the post office network, that nothing will be done to reduce the scope of post office services available to my constituents, or the time when they are available?

**Gareth Thomas:** I can be absolutely clear with the hon. Gentleman: I said no decision had been made on any individual directly managed branch, and that is absolutely true. We are also clear that sub-postmasters, trade unions and communities will have to be consulted about the future of directly managed branches. We want an improvement in the services that post offices can provide; that is one of the reasons for our work on banking services with the Post Office going forward.

**Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): I recently met two constituents who are yet to receive compensation as former sub-postmasters. I felt their pain, and I felt that their pain was being compounded by the long-drawn-out process, driving mental anguish for them on a daily basis. Can my hon. Friend update the House on when the appeal system for the Horizon shortfall scheme will be up and running?

**Gareth Thomas:** We expect the appeals process that we announced for the Horizon shortfall scheme to be up and running soon—realistically, probably early in the new year. I say gently to my hon. Friend that I share his deep concern that there are so many sub-postmasters who are victims of the Horizon scandal, and who are still to receive their compensation and full and fair

redress. We have seen an increase in the numbers getting redress, but there is more work to do; it is a challenge that we are very much focused on as a Government.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Street in my constituency will lose its main high street post office in early 2025. There is a new listing for another post office, but questions around its viability will now obviously arise. Can the Minister tell me how he will ensure that the Post Office is secured on a long-term, sustainable footing, to reassure my communities and rural communities like them that the vital high street services that they rely on will be retained?

**Gareth Thomas:** There are a number of elements to securing the future of the Post Office. First, we must look at its commercial operation, which is why an improvement in the banking offer available through post offices, and the commitment of the banks to working with the Post Office to roll out banking hubs, is so important. Secondly, we must look at how we can increase sub-postmaster pay, so that more people are willing to come forward to run post office branches. Thirdly, we must look at the Post Office's costs, and how they can be better managed.

**Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. In a changing context in which banking hubs are being looked at for places across the country, does he agree that we need to pursue them very aggressively and assertively, and also look at shared provision with local councils—for instance, at using libraries and other centres, so that we can spread the cost and keep these essential services open, where possible?

**Gareth Thomas:** I am absolutely open to any idea that will help to speed up the roll-out of banking hubs; I recognise that they are crucial for communities up and down the UK. If he has particular ideas, I am very happy to talk to him about them separately.

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): I am very pleased that Horning post office in my constituency will reopen later this month, following months of hard work by the local community. That shows that there is an important future for our local post offices in rural North Norfolk, and that future includes supporting bank hubs in our market towns. The people of Holt are looking forward eagerly to the opening of their hub soon. Can the Minister tell me his personal vision for the future of the Post Office, and does that include supporting vital local services in our rural areas?

**Gareth Thomas:** I am delighted to hear the news about a post office branch opening in the hon. Gentleman's constituency; that will be of great comfort to his constituents. As I set out, one way in which we can improve the services available to all communities through the post office is better provision of banking services. We are actively working with the Post Office on that. The roll-out of banking hubs will also help to improve the quality of the service that post offices can provide for all our communities.

**Lee Barron** (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): I welcome the assurances that the Minister has given. The Post Office will go about making the 115 potential branch closures and 1,000 job losses either by closing

the Crown post office network, or by franchising it off. In Corby, New Post Office Square opened up when the town centre, which had a post office, was rejuvenated. There is now no post office in New Post Office Square, because it was franchised into the back of a shop, and that shop decided not to extend the franchise. We need an assurance from the Post Office that it will not turn around and take the numbers away from us. Does the Minister agree that the Post Office must take into account the Government's priorities for high streets, and ensure that whatever it is planning fits around the Green Paper proposed for next year?

**Gareth Thomas:** I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me, but I am not aware of the exact circumstances in his constituency, though I am happy to meet him to talk through them, if he thinks that would be useful. As I hope I have set out, we remain absolutely committed to ensuring that every community has good access to a post office branch and all the services that it provides. That is as true for his constituents as it is for the constituents of Members across the House.

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): Oswestry in my constituency is the second largest town in Shropshire and serves a vast rural area stretching into mid-Wales and across north Shropshire. It is digitally excluded because it often does not have adequate mobile signal or broadband services, so the full range of Crown post office services are absolutely essential there. Will the Minister assure me that the full range of Crown post office services will remain in Oswestry, and that the Post Office will take into account the importance of retaining vital services in rural areas, which are being deserted by commercial organisations such as banks?

**Gareth Thomas:** I am absolutely clear that the Government recognise and accept our continuing responsibility to ensure that post office services are available to every community across the UK, and that there is easy access to a post office branch in rural and urban areas alike; we remain absolutely committed to that. As I said, no decision has been taken to close any individual directly managed branch, but it is right that the Post Office considers all its costs if we are to achieve an increase in sub-postmaster pay. In that regard, and on the hon. Lady's wider point, it is important that the Post Office management consults properly—previous management teams have not always done so—with sub-postmasters, trade unions and other stakeholders.

**Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments on the Horizon scandal, which affected sub-postmasters in every constituency, including mine. However, I must express concern about Stornoway post office being on the list of the 115 possible closures. The loss of the main post office would be a dreadful blow for the town, so I urge the Minister and the Post Office to ensure that islanders have full physical access to Crown post office services. All options must be considered—except closure.

**Gareth Thomas:** As I have said, we are clear about our continuing commitment to ensuring that every community, no matter where in the UK, has access to post office services. That commitment has not changed.



[Gareth Thomas]

Indeed, we want to improve the quality of the offer from the Post Office—hence my comments about banking services. However, if it would be helpful, I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss his concerns about his community.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Minister's commitment to the Post Office compensation—he laid out clearly the way forward, and we were all pleased to hear it. However, I must register my concern that post office branches in Newtownards in my constituency, and in Bangor in the neighbouring constituency of North Down, are poised to close, leaving more than 100,000 people in Northern Ireland with no main post office. That will do nothing but reduce services for the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland and must be strenuously opposed. What steps will be taken between now and the final decision to ensure that the Government do not leave tens of thousands of people without a full service? The Post Office acknowledges the limitations of post office hubs in garages and shops. They cannot cope, so big post offices must remain open.

**Gareth Thomas:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments, as ever, and I recognise the concerns of his constituents. As I said, we remain absolutely committed to ensuring that every community has good access to post office services going forward, and no decision has been made about directly managed branch closures. If we are to achieve the objective of putting the Post

Office on a genuinely sustainable footing and increasing sub-postmaster pay, we must consider all Post Office costs and how we can genuinely deliver, to all communities, a better future for the Post Office. We are doing that, but I am conscious of the strong point that he has made about his constituents.

**Mr Mark Sowards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Residents in Morley are extremely alarmed that Morley post office on Queen Street is one of those that could be closed. Queen Street is the beating heart of Morley, and many people come into the town centre to use the services at the post office before going on to other shops. Bank branches have left our town, too, and on their way out, they pointed at the post office and said, "Don't worry, you've got services there." Well, now we are worried. Will the Minister restate what he has already said several times about no decisions having been made on closures, and will he meet me to talk about what we can do keep Morley post office functioning?

**Gareth Thomas:** I will happily meet my hon. Friend. As I have said, no decision to close individual directly managed branches in full has been taken. It is right that the Post Office considers the cost of providing directly managed branches going forward if we are to achieve the objective of putting it on a sustainable footing. However, we are absolutely clear that every community in the UK needs to be able to retain good access to post office services, and we are looking at what else we can do with the Post Office senior management team to improve post office services, not least in banking.

## Point of Order

2.18 pm

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister said that the Government had "not touched national insurance", despite their having raised the rate of national insurance payable by 1.2% and reduced the threshold at which employers have to pay it. May I seek your guidance on what the Prime Minister can do to correct the record?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani)**: I think the right hon. Member knows that that is not a matter for the Chair, but I know that he takes this matter very seriously, and his point of order is on the record. Knowing him, he will no doubt pursue the matter via every process and procedure available to him.

## BILLS PRESENTED

### NON-DOMESTIC RATING (MULTIPLIERS AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS) BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Secretary Angela Rayner, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Bridget Phillipson, Catherine McKinnell, Jim McMahon, Stephen Morgan and James Murray, presented a Bill to make provision for, and in connection with, the introduction of higher non-domestic rating multipliers as regards large business hereditaments, and lower non-domestic rating multipliers as regards retail, hospitality and leisure hereditaments, in England and for the removal of charitable relief from non-domestic rates for private schools in England.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 129) with explanatory notes (Bill 129-EN).*

### NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS (SECONDARY CLASS 1 CONTRIBUTIONS) BILL

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported by the Prime Minister, Darren Jones, James Murray, Tulip Siddiq and Emma Reynolds, presented a Bill to make provision about secondary Class 1 contributions.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 131) with explanatory notes (Bill 131-EN).*

## Debt Relief (Developing Countries)

*Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)*

2.19 pm

**Bambos Charalambous** (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for or in connection with the relief of debts of certain developing countries.

Debt remains a huge cause of concern for low-income countries in the wake of the covid pandemic and following rising inflation on food and fuel. Thirty-four African countries spend more on external debt payments than on their entire healthcare and/or education budgets. According to a report from the Send My Friend To School coalition, across low-income countries, debt servicing on net interest payments accounts for 60% of education expenditure. The latest figures for Africa show that the total external debt serviced by all African countries in 2024 was \$104 billion. Over 45% of that amount, \$47 billion, is owed to private creditors. To put that into perspective, the entire UK aid budget to Africa in 2024 was £993 million, or less than one hundredth of what African countries owe in external debt.

To use a specific example, this year the Kenyan Government will spend \$5.149 billion on external debts, of which \$2.981 billion will go towards external debt payments to commercial creditors. The UK provides Kenya with £45 million in aid, so in effect, UK aid is going towards helping service that debt. At a time when we have seen overseas development aid cut from 0.7% to 0.5% of GNI, we need to have an overview of the contribution that aid makes, rather than seeing aid in isolation. If we are truly serious about ensuring that UK aid goes further, debt relief from private creditors has to be addressed.

The G20 has identified debt as a problem for developing countries, and has taken some steps to address it. In November 2020, it created the common framework for debt treatments beyond the debt service suspension initiative. The intention was to allow low-income countries with unsustainable debt to use that framework to obtain debt relief, including from private creditors. Although well intentioned, the common framework has been ineffective, because it has no teeth. Private creditors have been unwilling to participate, and there is no process to ensure their participation. Consequently, while Governments were negotiating debt relief with low-income countries, private creditors were just going through the motions. One example is the in-principle agreement that Zambia made with private creditors, under which they would have been paid a third more than Government creditors, including the UK and China. Needless to say, the Government creditors vetoed that deal on the basis that there was no equal treatment of creditors as required by the common framework, leaving Zambia in limbo.

The four countries that requested debt treatment under the common framework experienced lengthy delays and a long, drawn-out process, with very little to show for all the time and effort spent on trying to obtain debt relief. Critics suggest that the failings of the common framework have been due to a lack of enforcement, a lack of a mechanism to co-ordinate creditors, a lack of transparent debt reporting, and an inability to prevent litigation and hold-out behaviour from creditors. The

[Bambos Charalambous]

fact that only Chad, Zambia, Ghana and Ethiopia have used the common framework, and that none has seen any debt cancelled from private creditors, has shown how ineffective the common framework is and has put other countries off applying.

Despite the G20 Governments and the International Monetary Fund urging private creditors to co-operate, the G20 has not offered low-income countries the tools they need to bring the private creditors to the table to negotiate debt treatment. There is an urgent need for a mechanism that will ensure that Governments and private creditors share the burden equally when restructuring debt with low-income countries, and that is something the UK can help with. The UK can play a big role in overcoming the delays and bureaucracy caused by the common framework and can deliver equal treatment of creditors. In doing so, it will deliver debt justice for low-income countries and do what the G20 intended.

How could this be done? Ninety per cent of the debt of the low-income countries eligible to apply to the common framework is governed by English law. This Bill will compel private creditors to actively participate in the debt relief process by preventing them from suing for more than they would get if they accepted debt relief on the same terms as other lenders. Knowing that they could not get more than Government creditors would also have the effect of encouraging private creditors to reach a quicker settlement, rather than drag their heels as they have been doing under the common framework—some might say that in doing so, they are acting in bad faith. If successful, this process could lead to more applications from low-income countries than the paltry four that the common framework has received to date. That could unlock billions for low-income countries to spend on their health and education systems, while not costing the Treasury a penny.

For those who are sceptical about whether this can be done, I point to a precedent. In 2010, the UK passed similar legislation, the Debt Relief (Developing Countries) Act, which started off as a private Member's Bill introduced by my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne). That Act compelled private creditors to participate in debt relief under the now-outdated heavily indebted poor countries initiative. A subsequent Government review in 2011, led by the coalition Government, found that legislation to have been a success and to have had no adverse impact on the UK economy. My Bill will update the 2010 Act, strengthen certain measures, and make it applicable to the current G20 common framework.

This Bill will reduce the burden of debt for the poorest countries and help overcome the ineffectiveness of the G20 common framework. It will also prevent future debt crises by deterring risky lending. There is much more that could be done to strengthen the common framework, such as introducing the legal automatic suspension of payments when a country applies to the common framework, as is the norm when big corporations

deal with corporate debt restructurings. However, that is outside the scope of my Bill; perhaps it is something that Ministers can take up directly with the G20.

Next year will be the 25th anniversary of the Jubilee 2000 campaign, which sought debt forgiveness for low-income countries and saw over \$100 billion of debt cancelled for the 35 poorest countries in the world. We need to repeat that success, so that the savings from debt cancellation can go towards funding health and education programmes in low-income countries. With 3.3 billion people living in countries that spend more on debt servicing than on health or education, the time to act is now.

Countries seeking debt relief are also experiencing extreme weather events due to climate change. Last year, Zambia had its most severe flooding for more than 50 years, with over 25,000 households affected. Right now, it is experiencing its worst drought in 40 years, with 50% of this year's crops lost and with 2024 on track to be the hottest year on record. Zambia is suffering despite only contributing 0.01% of global greenhouse emissions since the industrial revolution. Although Zambia has sought debt relief from its largest private creditor, that creditor has refused to cancel the amount the International Monetary Fund has said is necessary to make the debt sustainable. That is typical of the behaviour of private creditors towards low-income countries. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure that countries such as Zambia get the debt justice they deserve, and it is imperative that we take action now.

Before I conclude, I want to thank the organisations that have provided me with invaluable advice and support in preparing this Bill, which have been championing the cause of debt relief for many years. Those organisations are Christian Aid, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, and Debt Justice. I also wish to thank the Send My Friend To School coalition and the House of Commons Library for some of the statistics used in my speech. I hope that this Bill will go some way to securing debt relief for low-income countries, allowing the money saved to be reinvested in health and education systems for those who need that investment most and helping to tackle the effects of climate change, such as in the case of Zambia. Morally, it is the right thing to do; it is the just thing to do; and it is the compassionate thing to do. I hope this Bill will receive the support it deserves and needs.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Bambos Charalambous, Sarah Champion, Alice Macdonald, Sam Rushworth, David Taylor, Laura Kyrke-Smith, Gordon McKee, Chris Law, Ellie Chowns, Liz Saville Roberts, Tonia Antoniazzi and Jo Platt present the Bill.

Bambos Charalambous accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March 2025, and to be printed (Bill 128).*



## Representation of the People

2.30 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** I beg to move,

That the draft Voter Identification (Amendment of List of Specified Documents) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 15 October, be approved.

The Elections Act 2022 amended the parliamentary election laws set out in schedule 1 to the Representation of the People Act 1983, setting out the requirement for voters to show photographic identification when voting in person in a polling station in Great Britain. The list of accepted forms of photographic ID is set out in rule 37 of schedule 1 and includes passports; driving licences; various concessionary travelcards; identity cards bearing the Proof of Age Standards Scheme hologram, such as the Young Scot card, or the National Union of Students TOTUM card; blue badges; and the defence identity card.

As set out in our manifesto, the Government are committed to improving how voter ID works by addressing inconsistencies and ensuring that legitimate electors are able to vote. We are carefully and thoroughly reviewing the voter ID rules and evaluating how they impacted citizens during the general election. Work is already under way on that evaluation, using data gathered at polling stations, along with public opinion surveys and qualitative research involving electors and the electoral sector.

The Electoral Commission has also conducted a thorough review of the 2024 general election. It published an interim report on voter ID in September, and a final report on the wider conduct of the polls just today. We will of course carefully consider the commission's findings and recommendations as part of our own review of the voter identification policy, and we will respond formally to both the commission's reports in the new year. If we find that changes are necessary or appropriate, we will bring forward further proposals on the wider voter ID policy in due course. I do not wish to speculate today on what those might be, but I will of course keep the House informed on the outcomes of our work.

However, there is a clear gap in the existing provisions, which we can and should address now: the absence of His Majesty's armed forces veteran card from the accepted voter ID list. That is why we made the card's inclusion in that list a manifesto commitment. The veteran card recognises our veterans' service and dedication to our country, and the proposed change is just one of the things that the Government are doing to honour their contribution. We should not allow the need for fuller consideration of the policy in the round to stop us making a necessary change that will support veterans to exercise their democratic rights. Opposition Members were supportive of this change when in government, and I hope that consensus remains.

This instrument makes changes to the current legislation, which sets out the accepted forms of voter ID, and will result in the veteran card being added to the list of accepted forms of ID for the purposes of voting in Great Britain. That will mean that holders of the veteran card can use it to prove their identity when voting in person in polling stations in all elections from May 2025 onwards. The veteran card was fully launched in January

this year and is now available free of charge to all veterans. Adding the veteran card to the list, alongside the already accepted defence identity card, will bring parity between veterans and serving armed services personnel when voting.

The regulations make two further small changes, introducing technical clarifications to support the smooth and consistent application of the law. The need for them was highlighted by electoral administrators who are operating the policy in practice. First, the regulations provide clarification regarding the entry in rule 37 relating to Commonwealth passports by updating it to refer to the list of Commonwealth countries in the British Nationality Act 1981. That will make the voter ID legislation consistent with electoral registration legislation. In particular, it will allow Zimbabwean passports to be used as identification at polling stations from May 2025.

Secondly, the regulations vary the entry relating to the Scottish national entitlement card. As currently drafted, the legislation lists that document under the section referring to concessionary travel passes. The regulations will amend the legislation so that the card, which can be used for a number of purposes, is listed elsewhere, and make it clear that those cards issued for non-travel purposes should also be accepted.

Finally, the regulations contain updated prescribed forms of the poll cards sent out to electors ahead of an election. That is to update the provisions giving electors guidance on the voter identification policy, to reflect the changes I have set out.

Implementing our manifesto commitment to add the veteran card to the list of accepted identification for voting is an important first step in a much broader programme of work to open up participation in our democracy. The Government were elected on a manifesto for change, and alongside our commitment to review and amend the voter ID rules, we have an ambitious and exciting programme to strengthen and widen our vibrant democracy. That includes introducing votes for 16 and 17-year-olds in all elections, improving voter registration and strengthening our political finance framework to protect against foreign interference in our elections.

Here and now, the addition of the veteran card supports an important community in engaging in elections and exercising their democratic rights. I thank all those who have campaigned to make this change a reality, and I hope hon. Members will join me in supporting these measures.

2.37 pm

**Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con):** I know that the Minister has been in position for three months, but I have just joined the shadow Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government team, so I welcome her to her place. I look forward to working constructively with her from the Opposition Benches over the next few years—hopefully not too many years.

I am pleased to confirm that the Opposition support the regulations, which will add the new veteran card to the list of approved photographic identification that can be used for voting at a polling station. In addition, the regulations make small changes, which we also support, to the existing entries in the list of approved identification regarding Commonwealth passports and Scottish national entitlement cards.

[*Paul Holmes*]

I am proud that the last Government were responsible for introducing the new veteran card to help veterans access specialist support and services, including from the NHS, their local authority and charities. We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to our veterans, and it is my sincere hope that the veteran card is making it easier for those who need support for issues related to their service to access it in good time. I am grateful to the Minister for the Armed Forces for being here to show his and the Government's support and thanks for the work that our veterans do.

Rolling out the new veteran card to around 2 million veterans in the UK is a vast job, and I am sure the whole House will agree that it was vital that the last Government got things right, not only so that veterans could benefit from the new card as soon as possible, but so that the system can accurately and securely process the large volume of card applications required.

In 2019, the Government began rolling out the veteran card to armed forces personnel who have left since December 2018. In January this year, following months of testing, the previous Government launched the online application service to enable veterans who left the armed forces before December 2018 to apply. A paper-based application process was also launched. I take pride in the work undertaken by the last Government, including the £3 million investment made last year to scale up production of the veteran card.

As the Minister will know, because the list of accepted voter identification was approved by this place and the other place in December 2022, just over a year before the latest stage of rolling out the veteran card began, it was not possible to include the card on the original list of accepted voter identification. However, as many of my colleagues have made clear, the last Government planned to consider adding the new veteran card to the list once it had been rolled out. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who was a Minister before the general election, identified that that statutory instrument had been drafted and was due to be introduced to the House before the former Prime Minister called the general election. There is no doubt that the Opposition support such measures, as well as those that the Government have brought forward today.

It is important that any addition to the list of approved voter identification reflects the need for such documents to be suitably secure, so that they are not easy to falsify or to acquire with false information. That is vital if we are to secure the integrity of our elections in the way that voters deserve. I am glad that the new veteran card satisfies that requirement, and that its addition to the list of approved identification has been warmly welcomed by the veteran community. May I press the Minister to set out what action the Government plan to take to ensure that as many veterans as possible are made aware of that addition, ahead of polling day for the local elections in May next year?

Showing identification to prove who we are is something that people from all walks of life do every day. Opposition Members firmly believe that carrying out that practice at the polling station is a reasonable and proportionate way to give the public the assurance that their vote is theirs, and no one else's. Without a requirement for

voter identification it would be more difficult to take out a library book or collect a parcel from the post office than it would be to vote in someone else's name. I understand—perhaps the Minister will confirm this—that people even need to present ID to attend Labour party events. If Labour Members, who opposed voter identification in the last Parliament, think that is good enough for them at their events, have they now changed their mind about the issue? Even the Electoral Commission says that at the last general election in 2024, 99.92% of people successfully cast their vote.

In the Minister's opening speech she gave no guarantee about whether the Labour Government have fundamentally changed their view on the principle of voter identification. I understand that they will need to bring forward minor adjustments to documents that may need to be presented and amended, but will the Government confirm that after opposing what I would call a sensible measure, they have now changed their mind and accept that legislation brought forward under the previous Government will stay? What scrutiny mechanism will the Minister guarantee to the House, should the Government make their view known that they wish to change the approach of the last Government?

As I made clear to the House in 2022 when I spoke about a measure to introduce this legislation, voting with someone else's voting card is unlikely to be proven, and the lack of ability to prosecute on that basis is exactly why voter identification is so important. Prior to the introduction of voter identification, the previous security system had seen no significant change since 1872. I hope the Minister will assure me that she is of the opinion that people in this country deserve elections that are secure and fit for the 21st century. As she will be aware, most European countries require some form of identification to vote. International election observers repeatedly called for the introduction of identification in polling stations in Great Britain, saying that its absence opened the door to electoral fraud. Voter identification has been supported by organisations such as the Electoral Commission and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Indeed, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission recommends voter identification as part of the gold standard for ensuring that elections are free and fair, saying that it is

"of paramount importance for the overall integrity of the electoral process".

In conclusion, as I have outlined, it should go without saying that electoral fraud undermines the fundamental right to vote in free and fair elections. It was right for the last Government to stamp out the potential for voter fraud and bring the rest of the UK into line with Northern Ireland, which has had such arrangements before. The Opposition support adding the new veteran card to the list of approved identifications, and will closely scrutinise any further announcements from the voter identification scheme. After the Minister wove it into her opening remarks, we understand that the Government have made a commitment on votes at 16. I look forward to tempting her to outline to the Opposition and all parties in the House whether she will go further and say what scrutiny measures we will have in the House, and when we can expect the Government to bring such measures forward.

2.45 pm

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to the Minister for finding time to bring this statutory instrument to the Floor of the House. During last May's local elections, many veterans reported that they attempted to use the recently launched veteran card when voting, only to be told that it did not count as valid voter ID. That is unacceptable, and as the shadow Minister rightly highlighted, it is welcome that the Minister for Veterans' Affairs under the previous Government pledged to change that in time for a general election. This statutory instrument fixes the fault that saw veterans turned away at the ballot box last May, and I hope that the whole House will support this measure. I urge the Government to ensure that this is not the last set of changes to voter ID rules that we hear about this Parliament.

Thanks to the tireless work of electoral administrators up and down the country, the vast majority of our constituents were able to vote in the recent general election. But we must not be complacent. We must remember that voting is a right, not a privilege. This is not about something as easy as buying a car, it is about how we ensure that we hold our democratic officials to account. Where is that accountability when residents cannot vote, and when some of our councils have struggled to ensure that those residents can vote? We know that, sadly, some people were turned away from the polling station during the election. Indeed, I have spoken to people in my constituency who had issues with postal votes and with voting on the day. It is important that we look at the rules before us, and ensure that our voting system is accessible to everybody. Even if just one legitimate voter is turned away, that is a travesty and an affront to democracy.

As the shadow Minister and Minister highlighted, when we are considering extending the right to vote to 16 and 17-year-olds—something I have long campaigned for—it is crucial that the Government are aware of the anger felt by young people who, at this moment in time, see other people whose bus passes are allowed as a valid form of voter ID, yet that same photo ID is not allowed at the ballot box for someone who is 18. Make it make sense! That could be problematic for 16 and 17-year-olds, many of whom do not carry photo ID for age verification compared with their older peers. They are likely to have a bus pass for travel to and from college, university, or work, yet they still cannot use that to vote. I therefore agree with the Electoral Commission that the Government must consider the list of acceptable forms of voter ID, and at how we can increase awareness and the uptake of voter authority certificates.

I welcome that the Minister has previously said that this SI is the first of many steps in reforming the voter ID system, and that the Government will publish an independent evaluation on that later this year. I am concerned, however, that the longer we leave wider reform to voter ID, the more legitimate voters will fall through the cracks with their voices going unheard. Will the Minister confirm that this will not be the only reform we see in place before the next set of elections in 2025? Will she also confirm that further changes to the voter ID system will be in effect in time for the 2026 local elections?

I would also welcome clarification on the scope of the evaluation, and in particular on whether the Government are open-minded about perhaps introducing digital photo ID as a form of accessible ID, or perhaps scrapping the need to have photo ID to vote, or even scrapping voter ID in its entirety.

Finally, on a wider note, the Minister may be aware of the "Electoral Commission strategy and policy statement", introduced under the previous Government. If we are being honest, it was an attack on the independence of the Electoral Commission, and it was widely panned by the predecessor to my Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, many across different civic and democratic groups, the Electoral Commission and even the shadow Minister at the time. Can the Minister confirm whether the new Government will be scrapping that statement and looking to remove the basis for it in primary legislation during this Parliament?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** We now come to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

2.50 pm

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): Everyone should have the right to vote. It is a fundamental cornerstone of our democracy. Encouraging voter participation and democratic engagement should be at the centre of every Government policy, but political engagement is at a historic low. Voter participation in our recent general election was the lowest since 2001, with fewer than 60% of eligible voters casting their ballot. It is vital that the Government do all they can to encourage public engagement with politics. We must act to restore public trust and to ensure that we remove obstacles that prevent people from exercising their full democratic rights.

The Liberal Democrats are therefore glad to see the Government introduce measures that support veterans. While we are pleased that the regulations will make voting more accessible for veterans, we are concerned that the support does not extend to other affected groups, and we call on the Government to repeal the voter ID scheme entirely, to ensure that all eligible people can exercise their democratic right as easily as possible.

On Monday, we marked Remembrance Day. Every year, it serves as a solemn reminder of the bravery and sacrifice of so many who put their lives on the line in the defence of our liberty and democracy. We must ensure that all our veterans are properly supported and that their work is truly recognised. Liberal Democrats support a wide range of measures to support veterans, from ensuring that veterans impacted by the cost of living crisis are getting the support they need to doing more for unpaid carers in the armed forces community. It is shameful that the previous Conservative Government originally failed to include veterans' ID in their list of acceptable identification when they first introduced this legislation. The regulations will make it easier for veterans to vote through the expansion of accepted forms of ID at polling stations.

While the Liberal Democrats are supportive of measures to support veterans in accessing appropriate identification, we urge the Government to remove the requirement for ID altogether. Veterans are being let down. It is a scandal that those who put their lives on the line in the defence of our country too frequently fall through gaps



[Sarah Olney]

in support. The Liberal Democrats are calling for a fair deal for our veterans and military personnel. That includes placing a legal duty on Departments to give due regard to the armed forces covenant, establishing a centralised information hub for the families of service personnel, reaching an agreement with the European Union for reciprocal access to spousal employment for families of serving personnel and cancelling the Conservative Government's ill-advised cuts to the Army.

In 2022, the last Conservative Government introduced a new law requiring voters to show photo ID to vote in general elections, local elections and referendums in England. Being able to vote is a fundamental democratic right, yet thanks to the Conservatives, it is now at risk. Millions of voters are affected by this unnecessary and undemocratic requirement. The Liberal Democrats are opposed to the voter ID scheme, and we have called continually for the scheme to be scrapped.

**Paul Holmes:** The hon. Lady's party has the word democrat in it, so I want to understand something. If her policy was enacted, it would mean that people's votes could be taken simply by someone going to a polling station and knowing the name and address of their next-door neighbour. Does she agree with that and, if so, does she not understand that her proposals would bring a lack of security to the voting system in this country, would encourage fraud and would make sure that results were not as accurate as they could be?

**Sarah Olney:** The hon. Gentleman will know that the number of incidents of personation—I was just coming to this point—in 2022 was fewer than 13 and no prosecutions have taken place. He may say it is less than 1%, but that resulted in several thousand people being unable to exercise their democratic right to vote in the general election, because of the unnecessary requirement to produce voter ID. There may well be the risk of voter fraud, but it is yet to materialise in any significant way, and we have seen that this measure, brought in to combat that supposed risk, has resulted in thousands of our fellow citizens being unable to exercise their democratic right to vote. We are therefore opposed to the voter ID scheme and continue to call for it to be scrapped.

The shambles of the last Conservative Government created a crisis for democracy in this country with their cronyism, rule breaking and constant sleaze scandals, and public trust in Government is worryingly low. Successive Conservative Prime Ministers acted without integrity and treated Parliament and the people with disdain. The voter ID scheme is just a further example of that. We continue to lead the fight against this deeply unfair, unnecessary and expensive scheme. The impact must not be underestimated. Every vote matters, and we must ensure that we are not preventing people from making their voice heard.

The report published today by the Electoral Commission found that around 4% of eligible people who did not vote said that was because of the voter ID requirement. More in Common found that 3.2% said they were turned away at least once on 4 July. If that was reflected across the UK, that would equate to more than 850,000 people. Of that 3.2%, more than half said that either they did not return or they came back and were still unable to vote.

It is important to note that recent figures from London councils showed that three in 10 Londoners who were turned away from polling stations due to a lack of appropriate voter ID did not return to vote. It is essential that people who have a legitimate right to vote are not prevented from exercising that right. More broadly, voter ID has not impacted all constituents equally.

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The hon. Lady says that people have arrived to vote in somebody's name and have been turned away and did not return when asked for ID. How can she be certain that they were the person they said they were?

**Sarah Olney:** I am quoting, obviously, sources from the Electoral Commission and More in Common—organisations that have carried out extensive polling on this question—and people say they were turned away because they did not have the correct voter ID. I think the hon. Lady is quibbling, frankly. There is no doubt that significant numbers of people were unable to vote in this last election who had the right to do so, and that was because of this unnecessary legislation.

Research following the general election indicates that voter ID legislation disproportionately impacts minority ethnic groups, with Hope not Hate reporting that 6.5% of ethnic minority voters were turned away from a polling booth at least once, compared with 2.5% of white voters. Furthermore, Jacob Rees-Mogg, who was a Cabinet Minister when voter ID was introduced, described the law as an attempt to “gerrymander” elections in the Conservatives' favour. While we cannot know how those who did not cast their ballot would have voted, and so cannot directly measure the effectiveness of that deeply worrying intention, research by the Electoral Commission showed that the clearest impact of the voter ID requirement was in relation to social grade. The specification for accepted forms of ID specifically related to proof of address has disproportionately affected young people and people living in social housing.

We know that the dire economic situation inherited by this Government has required the Chancellor to make tough decisions, as we saw with the recent Budget statement. Given the need for the Government to make spending more efficient, why are they choosing to keep the voter ID scheme in place? The scheme is projected to cost £120 million over the next 10 years. It is a waste of taxpayers' money, and it is an obvious place where the Government could save money, redirecting it to support some of the most vulnerable in society or to fund vitally needed infrastructure projects.

More broadly, we are supportive of wider electoral reform, and we look to the Government to support our pledges to modernise our electoral system. Electoral Commission research shows that potentially as many as 8 million people are incorrectly recorded on the electoral register across the UK. We should be removing barriers for all voters to encourage voter participation and public engagement. Improvements in the system could be achieved through modernisation of the registration system, such as a requirement on public bodies to share data with electoral administrators to improve the register's accuracy. Given the huge cost of the voter ID scheme—£120 million over the next decade—could those resources not be better spent in modernising the electoral register and ensuring that all eligible voters are correctly recorded?

It is vital that barriers to voting are removed for all eligible voters and that the deeply worrying findings of the Electoral Commission regarding voter registration are addressed.

The Liberal Democrats want to strengthen democratic rights by expanding political and democratic engagement. We want to extend the right to vote to 16 and 17-year-olds. I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) about the additional barriers that voter ID will present to younger voters, once the right to vote is extended to them, because they will find it that much harder to find appropriate ID.

We call on the Government to enshrine the ministerial code in legislation, give Parliament the powers to hold Ministers to account and protect politics from corruption and sleaze. We also want to see this new Labour Government be bold in strengthening the power of local authorities who know best what their communities and towns need.

At the 2022 elections, there were 13 cases of alleged personation investigated, and no further action was taken in any of those cases. Would the Minister not agree that the much more concerning issue is that of an inaccurate electoral register? It is vital that we remove barriers to voting and do all we can to ensure that the 8 million people who are currently not correctly registered are not excluded from casting their ballots. Voter ID, which will cost £120 million over the next decade, is like using a sledgehammer to try to crack a nut. It is a waste of taxpayers' money.

While I appreciate the steps that the regulations will take to support veterans, they will do nothing to improve accessibility for many of the most affected communities, such as those renting from a social landlord, the unemployed, lower social grades, disabled people and young people. I question why the Government do not remove the barrier entirely, and I urge them to scrap the Conservatives' undemocratic voter ID scheme altogether.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Before I call the next speaker, I will announce the result of today's deferred Division on the draft Windsor Framework (Non-Commercial Movement of Pet Animals) Regulations 2024. The Ayes were 412 and the Noes were 16, so the Ayes have it.

*[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]*

3.1 pm

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): I thank the Government for bringing these regulations to the House more than six months before the next scheduled set of elections. It is a benchmark of good protocol and good practice in the electoral community to bring such changes forward with good notice, because of course they affect electoral administrators up and down the country. We did not see that under the last Government, with legislation often considered by the House just a couple of months before administrators were having to implement it. I therefore thank the Government for the good notice that they are giving today.

While I welcome the regulations and will support them, there are still some huge gaps in the accessibility of ID for voting. The Electoral Commission's early

research suggests that those who are unemployed, those from lower socioeconomic groups and disabled people are struggling to access ID that enables them to vote. That is reflected in the statistics we have seen from the last general election.

The Electoral Commission, which is our independent regulator, did an awful lot of good work at the general election to ensure that public awareness of the need for ID reached the vast majority of people. I believe that 87% of people were aware of the policy, but awareness fell in certain groups, particularly among young people, where it was just 71%, and those from ethnic minority backgrounds, at 76%. I call on the commission to continue to focus on the groups that are more difficult to reach, and I call on the Government to support the commission to be able to do that work so that we do not see a repeat of the general election in July, where about 16,000 people did not have the required ID to vote and were turned away at the ballot box. That is a travesty.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for making that point. I am interested in the report that has come out, which I have not had a chance to see. I believe that Northern Ireland has had voter ID since 2003—that system has been in place for two decades—so we have a direct comparison within the UK of voters in the general election, from which we can learn. Is there any evidence to suggest that Northern Ireland struggled? Given that it is two decades ahead of England in this case, would not it be interesting to see the comparative data so that the Government can take that forward and learn from Northern Ireland?

**Cat Smith:** The hon. Gentleman is testing my memory: I have read comparative data on Northern Ireland, but that was some time ago. I believe that it took several electoral cycles in Northern Ireland for information to be understood by the electorate and used more confidently.

The way in which the free voter ID cards are issued in Northern Ireland is different from Great Britain, and that brings me to voter authority certificates. One thing that I felt disappointed about at the last general election was the lower than expected take-up of those certificates. That might be partly because they were not made as appealing as they could be, and that was not necessarily about the application process.

I believe that in Northern Ireland people get a plastic card that can be used as ID for things other than voting, whereas the voter authority certificate in Great Britain is a piece of paper, which someone who is, for example, 19 or 20 years old will not want to take with them down to the local nightclub to try and gain access. The small plastic card, which is more durable for other purposes as well, had a higher take-up. Will the Minister respond with her thoughts about whether voter authority certificates could be expanded or developed, perhaps learning from parts of the United Kingdom where they have had higher take-up?

In the public opinion data from the general election, we learned that 4% of people who did not vote said that their decision was related to the voter ID requirement. My concern is that that research suggests there are people who are not turning up at polling stations for that reason. The data that the Government can access is from those who turn up at polling stations and are

[Cat Smith]

turned away, but I think that we are missing a lot of people who never left the house. Certainly my experience on polling day was of meeting voters who knew they did not have access to ID—perhaps they did not know about the voter authority certificate—and had decided to stay at home.

I approach this in a positive way and want to put recommendations and suggestions to the Minister on how we can improve access to democracy, which is incredibly important. I am pleased to hear that the Government will review the list of accepted forms of ID. I plead with the Minister to look seriously at ID that is accessible to younger voters, those with disabilities and those from ethnic minorities in addition to the veteran card, whose inclusion I very much welcome.

As the original legislation passed through Committee, one thing that was debated was whether registered voters who have ID and can prove their identity could make an attestation at the polling station on behalf of someone who does not have accepted ID, which is known as vouching. For example, we have Mr and Mrs Smith, and while Mrs Smith has a driving licence, Mr Smith does not, and neither of them have passports. They could go to the polling station together, where she could attest that her husband, who is with her, is who he says he is—the entitled voter—and use one ID to vouch for the whole household to ensure that he is not disenfranchised. I came across such a case in my constituency at the election.

As has been said, turnout at the general election fell below 60%, which was the lowest level since 2001. It was down 7.6 percentage points on the 2019 general election. That should give us all pause for thought. I believe that we have a crisis of voter participation in this country, with voters who are entitled and registered to vote choosing not to vote. The crisis is not people turning up at the polling station, pretending to be someone they are not and taking more votes than they are entitled to; it is those who are entitled to vote not voting. When turnout declines, the strength our democracy declines with it. I am pleased to hear the Government talk about strengthening participation in democracy, and I hope that the Minister will be able to say a little more about that in winding up.

May I ask the Minister whether she plans to return to the House—and if so, whether she has an idea of the timescale—to add more IDs to the list of acceptable IDs? Does she agree that to strengthen democracy we should be looking at how to increase voter participation and not placing additional barriers to people taking part?

On that point, the electoral roll continues to be deeply inaccurate. We now have the technology to look seriously at automatic voter registration, and the state knows who lives where and who is entitled to vote, so is there a way in which we can ensure that our electoral roll is far more accurate and reflects where people live so that it is easier for people to vote at a general election?

**Florence Eshalomi:** My hon. Friend makes a valid and important point. One constituent raised with me the fact that when they move, before they have finished unpacking they get a council tax bill. We can get people's information for that, so should we not register them to vote in the same way? The data is there.

**Cat Smith:** As I would expect, the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee makes a valid point. The reality is that in this country we make it very difficult for people to register to vote. I think that we can make it easier. We can make people's lives easier, and hopefully encourage participation in democracy. As I said, I am worried about the health of democracy in this country, and one of the things that worries me the most is the lack of participation. Voter turnout being on the decline concerns me, and I believe that it should concern the whole House.

3.11 pm

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): I very much welcome this proposal. I represent a constituency in Northern Ireland, where, as has been referenced, we have had voter ID for over 20 years. It works very well, and is something that the rest of the United Kingdom could build upon and learn from. The hon. Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) said that we have a voter ID card. Yes, we do. If a person does not have a passport, driving licence, bus pass or whatever else is on the list, they can apply to the Electoral Office, supply a photograph, and complete a form that a councillor, MP or doctor can verify. The person is then issued, for free, a voter ID card that carries their photograph and name. As the hon. Member suggested, it is valuable in other regards as well, so I would certainly recommend that as a way to go in these matters.

The draft regulations will add the veteran card to the list of usable identification. While the regulations apply only to Great Britain, upon seeing them I tabled a question to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and I was very pleased with his answer. He indicated that he proposes to add the veteran card to the list of acceptable documents in Northern Ireland before we have further elections. That is good because it not only enhances the parity that should exist but eases the situation of veterans when it comes to voting. I very much welcome that.

I listened with interest to the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats. I do not understand their aversion to voter ID. In Northern Ireland, we have had it for more than 20 years because of industrial-scale voter fraud, organised in the main of course by Sinn Féin, which literally had an army at its back to steal votes. Faced with that, it is right to have a system of voter ID. No party that is not engaged in cheating or wanting to cheat has anything to fear from it.

**Paul Holmes:** I share the hon. and learned Member's scepticism about the view of the Liberal Democrats. I believe the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) said that there were no convictions for electoral fraud in this country during 2021-22. Actually, there was a case in Eastleigh, my old constituency—I see that the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) is also present—of someone who had to complete 50 hours of unpaid work for providing a false name at a polling station in 2022.

**Jim Allister:** We should be doing anything that we can to diminish the opportunities for voter fraud. Why would we not? I do not understand the reticence.



**Sarah Olney:** The hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned that he does not see why political parties that compete fairly should have anything to fear. I put it to him that it is not a fear of political parties; it is much more about upholding the rights of voters. It is their interests that we need to protect, not the interests of political parties. That is why we are calling for the abolition of voter ID, although I fully take on board his points about the situation in Northern Ireland.

**Jim Allister:** We are protecting voters when we prevent voter fraud, which is precisely what voter ID does. It is the ordinary citizen who is being protected—the citizen who wants to play by the rules, who wants to vote properly, and who does not want to cheat or personate others. That is the person we are protecting by introducing voter ID.

**Sarah Olney:** As I said to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), the risk of being prevented from voting because of an inability to produce the relevant voter ID is much higher than the risk of personation. That is borne out by all the evidence and research. The hon. Gentleman managed to cite one instance in Eastleigh. I put it to him, and to the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), that that single instance is likely to be outweighed many times over by the number of people who were prevented from voting by the requirements.

**Jim Allister:** I respectfully suggest that there is probably an unknown hidden degree of personation. If a certain number of people are prosecuted, it does not mean that only that number of people are personating others. The way to rule out personation and present hurdles to it is to have voter ID. I really do not understand why anyone who wants a clean election, with only legitimate voters voting and only legitimate votes counted, would say, “We don’t want any protections to ensure that there’s no voter cheating.” Surely we should all want to be on the side of preventing cheating in elections. This really is the question: are we on the side of making it more difficult to cheat in an election, or on the side of making it easier? Surely we should all be on the side of making it more difficult. I therefore strongly defend voter ID.

Returning to the core subject matter, it is fitting that in the week of Remembrance Day we are adding the veteran card to the ID list. I look forward to that happening in Northern Ireland as well, but I want to raise a point that a serving soldier sent me a message about, which also touches on voting. He wrote:

“I just want to highlight a further issue that serving members of the Armed Forces when serving abroad can’t exercise their ability to vote due to the inefficiency of the now contracted British Forces Post Office. The length of time to request a postal vote”,

which is how most service people vote,

“and then to send your vote means you miss the deadline”

often. He then cited all the countries where servicemen are. Some can be as far away as the Falklands, Germany, Poland or Africa. He asked why we cannot have more efficiency in getting postal votes out to service people and back. That seems a legitimate question. He went on:

“Many other countries provide polling booths in their military bases or...in their embassies”.

Why do we not do that, Minister? Why do we not go further for our service personnel serving abroad, to ensure that they participate in the democratic process, as they are entitled to? Those are important questions that need to be answered, and a matter to which this House should give some attention.

3.19 pm

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this afternoon’s debate, though somewhat briefly. I welcome the speech by my hon. Friend the Minister and the measures outlined today.

I want to mention two points of interest to my local residents and others around the country. The first, mentioned earlier, is the huge importance of parity between veterans and serving personnel. It is important to discuss this regulation, and timely that we are doing so this week. The second point is about flexibility and practicality when it comes to the ability to vote. This statutory instrument is an important step forward. In my experience, many people struggle to find the right ID, particularly those who do not have driving licences or an up-to-date passport. I have come across many residents in Reading who live on relatively modest incomes, possibly in social housing, or who move house frequently, and who do not have access to ID and would appreciate existing ID being accredited. This is an important, welcome and timely step to help those people participate in elections.

I also welcome the fact that this change is happening six months before the next set of elections across the UK, the county council elections. Those will not take place in my community, as we are under a unitary local authority, but for many people this measure is timely and important, and it will help people participate in democracy. All of us across the House should welcome it. I do, because it shows respect to veterans.

I would like to mention British Gurkhas, as we have a large British Gurkha community in Reading. These are former Gurkha soldiers who have become British, and have British nationality. Many of them live in the town centre on relatively modest incomes, and this will be particularly welcome to them. I want to say a special thank you to that community.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** For the final Back-Bench contribution, I call Calvin Bailey.

3.21 pm

**Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I welcome this statutory instrument, which puts right an inconsistency that should never have arisen in the first place. I am grateful to the Government for their rapid work to get us to this point, including that done by the Minister for the Armed Forces. I recognise wider concerns about voter ID rules, but the Government are right to prioritise this measure as a first step, and keep to our manifesto promise while the wider review continues. As we know, many veterans face particular challenges in proving their identity in many aspects of civilian life. We veterans are more likely to have moved around regularly, and may not have the records, or the experience of engagement with civilian authorities, such as councils. That creates barriers that we need to remove.

[Mr Calvin Bailey]

In my career, my home base moved around constantly for many years. My driving licence gave my parents' address, because it was the only fixed abode I could refer back to. That is typical for many of our service personnel. We should recognise that service personnel have fewer fixed connections to rely on when they leave the forces. It can be confusing to go from having a MOD 90—a core part of life that shapes how service personnel engage with all the services and authorities that they encounter—to being out in the civilian world, with a blizzard of forms and applications that service personnel are simply not used to dealing with. The least we can do is to make sure that these processes are easier.

Obviously, the right first step was the veterans card, but it is of limited use unless it can make life easier and less hostile for people leaving our military after completing their service to us all. Society trusts our military IDs. In time, we must learn to continue valuing service, and must come to trust our veteran IDs in the same way.

We have to ask why it has taken action from this Government to correct this mistake and create parity between veterans cards and the MOD 90. It is shameful to read in leaked reports that the previous Prime Minister deliberately pushed to keep this barrier to veteran voting, based on nothing more than a vague fear that giving in on the veterans card would make it harder to say no to student ID cards. That says it all about the decision making on voter ID. It is welcome that the rules will be subject to continuing wider review.

I must also address the point made by the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) about service personnel, because I was impacted by the issue he mentioned. While serving in the United States, upholding democracy, I lost the ability to vote. That is a terrible affront, and I urge the Government to give due consideration to the issue. Fairness and doing right by those who have served us is vital, and it is what our communities want. Securing a sense of fairness and integration between the forces and our communities is important because of the impact on recruitment and retention, which have been degraded over the past 14 years, with real cost to our national defence.

I finish with the recognition, which I know Ministers share fully, that this is just one step among many that will need to be taken if we are to remove the barriers that many veterans face when trying to access their rights and play a full role in our communities. We can now look forward to working together on a wider agenda, which is so important for keeping all our people safe.

3.25 pm

**Rushanara Ali:** I am grateful to hon. Members for their excellent contributions, and to the shadow Minister for his contribution. This is the first of what I hope will be a number of debates on this important agenda. I will not be able to give an exhaustive response to all the contributions made today, but I look forward to meeting hon. Members to follow up on specific points, and I thank them for their work in the previous Parliament on this agenda.

I will speak to some of the points that have been made. The shadow Minister raised issues around the wider policy and what we will do. He will be aware that

today's measure is a really important part of the work we are doing. I am proud to say that my party is taking action to ensure that veterans can exercise their democratic rights, and I am grateful to colleagues for their work on that. On the points around evaluations of the 2024 general election, as I said, we will look carefully at the proposals in the previous Electoral Commission report and the one published today, and establish what action needs to be taken. We are undertaking a strategic review of electoral registration, conduct and funding processes, looking at the biggest challenges and pain points in the system, and working in partnership with the elections sector to understand how to address the challenges in a practical and pragmatic manner. I recently met the head of the Electoral Commission.

The shadow Minister mentioned raising awareness. The Electoral Commission has an important, positive role in raising awareness among not only veterans but other electors, such as young people, and in supporting the needs of other groups who have traditionally been excluded. We look forward to working with it closely on this very important agenda.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** The Minister is making an excellent point about broadening this out—veterans are a great first step—to other groups, in particular those who are disabled, or blind and partially sighted. One of the crucial challenges they face is being able to vote independently and in secret, as well as that of having access to the right ID. Will she take that point away and ensure that in further conversations, she focuses on enabling those living with sight loss to vote independently and in secret?

**Rushanara Ali:** I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution; she is a powerful advocate on this agenda. I am incredibly proud of the work she has done to raise awareness, and I look forward to working with her and others to make sure that voters are not excluded, in particular voters with a visual impairment or other disabilities.

We will look carefully at the commission's findings and recommendations in both the reports that have been published and provide a formal response to both.

On the wider points about the evaluation of the introduction of voter ID at UK elections, Members will be aware that the Elections Act 2022 includes a requirement for the Secretary of State to publish an evaluation of the impact of the implementation of the voter ID policy on the next local elections and the next two UK parliamentary elections. We have contracted IFF Research, an independent research organisation, to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the 2024 general election. In light of the points that have been made about the ID schemes used in the elections, it is critical that we look at the evidence base and identify what further action needs to be taken. I look forward to working with colleagues as that evidence comes through.

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) made a point about Northern Ireland. It is critical that we respect the way elections are run in Northern Ireland, and that we recognise the differences between the procedures in Northern Ireland and Great Britain. There has been a requirement, as he highlighted, to show voter ID in Northern Ireland since 2002. There are also differences in the lists of accepted documents.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland intends to bring forward legislation to add the veteran card to the list of ID documents that may be used in Northern Ireland's polling stations in advance of its next elections, scheduled to be held in 2027.

A number of points were made about the impact of voter ID on 16 and 17-year-olds. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi) for her work as a Front-Bench spokesperson on these important issues. As part of our commitment to expand the voter franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds, we will need to consider whether the identification requirements may be more difficult for younger voters to meet. Some of those concerns have been highlighted today. It is crucial that there are no barriers to the enfranchisement we want to see. We look forward to understanding better what is different about the needs of that younger demographic, in terms of patterns of ownership of identity documents. We are considering that as part of our work towards expanding the franchise. Once again, I look forward to hearing from colleagues about their experiences as they discuss this important change with young people in their constituencies. I will be doing the same in mine.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) and others raised accessibility, in particular the support needed for disabled voters. We are committed to supporting returning officers to ensure that disabled people can participate in elections. We continue to work closely with organisations that represent disabled people and the elections sector to support them to take part in the democratic process. Importantly, the blue badge and the disabled person's bus pass are already in place, but we will of course consider whether more can be done to support those electors, because it cannot be right that they are excluded in any way.

**Marsha De Cordova:** Forgive me for expanding on this issue slightly, but does my hon. Friend agree that we should consider other methods of voting? To be accessible, voting could be done digitally.

**Rushanara Ali:** That is a very important point. I do not want to pre-empt what we will do in the future, but I look forward greatly to my hon. Friend's providing input as we conduct the review, and I encourage other colleagues to do the same. This is a very important agenda, and it is a big opportunity for parliamentarians and others to contribute to the proposals that we will consider and present.

A number of points were made about additional documents, and we will look at those during our review. I have mentioned young people in particular.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green, the newly elected Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, raised a number of important points. I will not go through them all, but I look forward to meeting her and others to pursue the agenda further. She referred to the current strategy and policy statement; it does not reflect the Government's priorities, so we will not be leaving it in place.

My hon. Friend also spoke about changes ahead of May 2025. It is important for any proposals for electoral changes to be properly considered and for any change in the list of accepted ID to be based on sound data. It is right that electors have certainty and clarity about what is accepted, and that electoral administrators are fully able to take account of any changes. Accordingly, we will not introduce further changes for May 2025. We are taking our time to get this right, and we will ensure that any further changes are clear and fully considered. At this point, we are not committed to a specific timeframe.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) mentioned the role and contribution of British Gurkhas. We are all incredibly grateful for their contribution, and that is partly why this agenda is so important.

Let me say something about the wider work that the Government are doing to support veterans. The Minister for Veterans and People is working with veterans groups and armed forces charities, as well as public bodies, to promote the accessibility and availability of the support for them. That support ranges from housing and skills to mental health provision, as well as help for those who want to stand for public office. I am delighted to see a number of colleagues on both sides of the House who have come to our Parliament from the armed services; they have made some powerful contributions, including their speeches in this debate.

Our work on voter ID for veterans is very much part of this agenda. The Veterans Minister will be working closely with me to ensure that we widen both accessibility and awareness through those networks. This statutory instrument is part of the Labour Government's work to support veterans, not only in terms of democratic participation but in respect of the wider support that they need, in recognition of the contribution that they have made to our country and our security through their service in the armed forces. There is also the wider commitment that the Government have made in putting the armed forces covenant fully into law.

We are all justifiably proud of our long history of democracy, but we should never take it for granted. The addition of the veteran card to the list of documents accepted as identification at the polling station will help this important community to engage in the electoral process and exercise their democratic rights. I hope Members will agree that the regulations provide for some important changes to our electoral rules, strengthening, widening and securing our democracy into the future, and I hope they will join me in supporting the veteran community. I am grateful for their contributions to the debate, and I am incredibly proud of the fact that it is this Government who have introduced these changes. I commend the regulations to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the draft Voter Identification (Amendment of List of Specified Documents) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 15 October, be approved.



## Environmental Protection

3.40 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh):** I beg to move,

That the draft Environmental Protection (Single-use Vapes) (England) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 23 October, be approved.

Every person in this country has the right to walk down their street without stumbling on a single-use vape that has been tossed on to the pavement. They have the right to take their children to the park without their child picking up a shiny vape that has been cast aside in the playground. No driver should fear that their car tyre will explode if they drive over a single-use vape in the road, yet I was recently sent a picture of just such a tyre explosion. What started out as a useful means to stop adults smoking has become a menace on our streets.

Almost three quarters of single-use vapes are incorrectly disposed of. Material Focus estimates that 5 million vapes are thrown away each week—equivalent to eight vapes a second, and four times as many as at this time last year. They have turned into a constant wave of waste and are wreaking havoc, and we are left to pick up the pieces. When they are littered, they introduce plastics, nicotine salts, copper, cadmium, lead and lithium-ion batteries into our environment. That harms our wildlife, our soils, our rivers and our streams. Last year, 50 tonnes of lithium—the amount needed to power 5,000 electric vehicle batteries—was discarded into our environment.

Alternatively, vapes end up being incorrectly put into black-bin household waste. At best, they either end up in landfill or are incinerated. At worst, they cause fires when they are crushed in bin lorries. That risks harm to the public, refuse workers and firefighters. In September, a fire at a waste centre in Basildon was started by a lithium-ion battery—the sort that is found in vapes. The fire spread across warehouses and set alight 15 heavy goods vehicles. People were evacuated, and the fire service was on site for 24 hours a day for almost a week.

We know that these products are designed to appeal to children. According to Action on Smoking and Health's research, the rise in single-use vapes has happened concurrently with an increase in young people vaping. We must ban these harmful products, and I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for taking steps to introduce a ban earlier this year. His was the right action, and we will not delay. Transitioning to a zero-waste economy is one of five priorities on which my Department, as part of a mission-led Government, will deliver to rebuild Britain. This ban is an important first step on that journey.

Before I turn to the details of the legislation, I thank the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee for its work. Its report highlighted several points of interest, particularly the links to youth vaping, which I have mentioned, and whether we will monitor products coming to market following the implementation of the proposed ban. We will work closely with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to understand the types of products coming to market, and we will continue to look at this in future.

The Committee also highlighted correspondence from Green Alliance, which supports the ban but wished for earlier implementation and sought assurance on enforcement. We want to introduce the ban as soon as possible, but we must allow a minimal but reasonable transition for businesses to run down stocks and adapt their business activities. This is why the ban will come into force on 1 June next year. Effective enforcement is crucial, and we will work closely with enforcement agencies to understand how best to support them.

Let me now turn to the details of the legislation. The ban we are introducing uses powers under the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Part 1 sets out the meaning of a single-use vape, which is a vape that is “not refillable and not rechargeable”.

The ban applies to England only, but my excellent officials have worked closely with the devolved Governments, who are bringing an equivalent legislation. We are grateful to our colleagues in the devolved Governments for their collaboration to ensure that, from 1 June next year, there will be a UK-wide ban.

Parts 2 and 3 of the legislation introduce offences and enforcement provisions. Enforcement of the ban in England will be carried out through local authority trading standards officers, and the powers in the legislation have been developed in partnership with them. The regulations mean that illegal traders can be issued with an on-the-spot fine and that the products they are selling can be taken away. It is also possible for local authorities to reclaim the costs of investigating, and enforcing, the regulations from the rogue traders. Finally, part 4 of the legislation covers requirements for guidance and the need to review and evaluate the ban.

**Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con):** The Minister has talked about the environmental impact of disposable vapes, but what does she think about the environmental impact of the reusable vape devices that are being sold? The Government's own impact assessment suggests that by the year 2034, there will be a total of 2 billion reusable vape devices being sold. What impact does she think that will have on the environment, and how will that differ from the sale of disposable vapes?

**Mary Creagh:** What we are trying to do with this ban is to get rid of the vapes that are not rechargeable and refillable. The vapes that are both refillable and rechargeable will continue to be sold as a valuable aid to help adults stop smoking. The almost toy-like vapes that we find littered in every street are the real problem, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's constituency is no different from mine in that regard. I will come back to him on that. On predictions about the future, we saw yesterday in the newspapers that a pill has been developed to help smokers quit smoking, so who knows where we will be in five years' time. We can always guarantee that the future will be different from the past.

Let me conclude by saying that vapes can help adults to quit smoking, but single-use vapes are a waste of our precious national resources. The sheer volume of them that we see on our streets and the widespread harm that they cause must be stopped, so I commend these regulations to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the shadow Minister, Dr Neil Hudson.

3.48 pm

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Epping Forest) (Con): It is an honour to be speaking for the Opposition on this important motion on environmental protection. May I begin by thanking the Government for laying this statutory instrument, which was originally put forward by the previous Conservative Government? This House is at its best when we are united in common humanity and working together across the House to pass legislation that will support and protect our precious environment, and also human and animal health. I am glad that the Government have agreed with our measures in bringing forward this ban on disposable vapes. I am happy to say, therefore, that we, His Majesty's loyal Opposition, will be supporting the passage of this important environmental statutory instrument.

I thank all those who have made this statutory instrument possible, from Ministers and MPs on both sides of the House to the charities, non-governmental organisations, parents, teachers and health professionals who sounded the alarm on the impact of disposable vapes. This legislation is a targeted step to ensure environmental protection and to mitigate the risks posed by single-use disposable vaping products.

To this end, we know that single-use vapes pose a range of risks to our environment, to animals, both domestic and wild, and even to people—especially our young folk, as the Minister said. It is estimated that almost 5 million single-use vapes are littered or thrown away in general waste every week.

The scale at which lithium-ion batteries are being improperly disposed of through single-use vapes is absolutely staggering. Astonishingly, it is estimated that, each year, the lithium in disposable vapes discarded in this way is equivalent to the lithium in the batteries of 1,200 electric vehicles or more.

Unfortunately, the number of single-use vapes being littered or thrown away each year is steeply rising. We know that the improper disposal of lithium-ion batteries already poses a significant risk of serious fires and pollution. As the Minister said, we are seeing such littering in both urban and rural areas, with vapes carelessly thrown to the wayside.

We also know that the disposal of single-use vapes can lead to plastics and toxic chemicals leaking into our natural environment and precious waterways. We cannot overestimate the seriousness of this or the long-term dangers that will result if we allow a steady or increasing flow of these materials into the environment. At a time when we are all concerned about the need to improve our waterways and rivers, it is vital that we tackle this very real threat.

The improper disposal of single-use vapes, which unfortunately occurs in the majority of cases, also poses risks to animals and wildlife that may potentially consume them. I declare a personal and professional interest as a veterinary surgeon and a pet owner. In fact, not long ago, when I was walking my young dog Poppy, she disappeared into the undergrowth and came out with a brightly coloured, melon-flavoured disposable vape in her mouth. Fortunately, I was able to get the vape out of her mouth quickly, but I shudder to think what could have happened if Poppy had chewed, crunched or swallowed it, given that it contained a battery, toxic chemicals and shattered plastic. I am sure the whole House will agree it

is particularly concerning that we are allowing millions of flavoured, brightly coloured items containing incredibly harmful chemicals to be littered, endangering the health of any creature that might ingest them.

With that in mind, it is important to act, and the implementation date of 1 June 2025 should offer businesses time to adjust to the new measures. However, it is vital for the Government to clarify how they intend to tackle the disposal of existing stock that is not sold by June 2025. Therefore can the Minister assure the House that any unsold single-use vaping stock, as of the implantation date, will be collected and disposed of appropriately? Additionally, will the Government produce a plan to ensure proper disposal?

With this ban coming into force, it is also essential that the illegal importation of single-use vapes is targeted. There are extremely concerning reports of the importation of vapes into this country that flout legal safety regulations on the number of puffs and, potentially, the nicotine content. There are even reports of vapes that contain illicit or dangerous substances, as well as chemicals such as lead and nickel.

It is hugely concerning to think that many of these single-use vapes have been getting into the hands of a large number of our under-18s. Advertisements on social media, specifically designed to entice young people with bright colours and appealing flavours such as bubble gum and cherry ice, are luring our young people into nicotine addiction and the risk of illicit substances.

All this could have serious consequences for the physical and mental health of our young people. There are reports of children having their sleep patterns disrupted, by setting their alarms for 2 am or 3 am so that they can have a vape during the night to avoid withdrawal symptoms in the morning, and students leaving lessons, or even examinations, because they simply cannot last without the use of a vape. The statutory instrument specifically targets the disposable vapes that are afflicting so many of our young people.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** The issue is not just disposable vapes but illegal vapes, of which as many as 120 million may be being sold each year. Should we not concentrate on that? These regulations deal only with legal vapes, but should we not be more concerned about the environmental impact and other health impacts of illegal vapes?

**Dr Hudson:** We need to get rid of all disposable vapes, legal or illegal. In fact, if any child is vaping, that is illegal. They are getting hold of vapes around the law and people are exploiting our young people. We still do not know the long-term consequences of vaping for their physical and mental health, so we just have to get on with getting rid of the single-use disposable vapes.

To be clear, we know that vaping has its part to play in helping adults to quit tobacco smoking, but we owe it to our young people and others to tackle the unacceptable risks of the illicit market and of existing nicotine addiction, and not to create a new generation of addiction.

On the risk of disposable vapes being imported for sale, will the Minister confirm what measures will be put in place to ensure border authorities have the proper powers and scope to ensure that there is no room for the creation of an illegal disposable vape import industry?

[Dr Hudson]

In addition, as part of that, will additional resources be allocated to our Border Force, so that the legislation will have the teeth it needs to prevent potential illegal imports of vapes? It is deeply important that the proper enforcement measures are in place, as we know how difficult it can sometimes be to enforce such bans.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** My hon. Friend keeps using the expression “potential illegal imports”, but massive illegal import is already taking place. The number of illegal imports detected is a minute proportion of the actual number of illegal imports that are coming into the market. Will he concentrate on the current issue relating to illegal imports, instead of describing that issue as a “potential”?

**Dr Hudson:** I am well aware that there are illegal importations and we need to clamp down on them, but once the ban is in place, if single-use disposable vapes are still being imported into the country, then it will be illegal to put them on sale. I am aware of the point that my hon. Friend makes, but we need to crack on and get rid of disposable vapes.

Will the Minister confirm what measures will be put in place to ensure full and proper enforcement of the ban? Will she reassure the House that the Government will monitor, on an ongoing basis, the performance of enforcement measures in preventing the sale and distribution of single-use vapes? In addition, will the Minister reassure the House that the Government will keep a watching brief on unscrupulous people trying to create loopholes in the ban by adapting, in a sham way, disposable vapes to look like reusable, refillable or rechargeable ones?

I welcome the Minister’s comments about the devolved Administrations, but with this England-only legislation, and with similar versions of the regulations likely to be approved in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in the coming months, will the Government assure the House that discussions are set in place with the devolved Administrations on specific timings, so that we do not inadvertently create the potential for disposable vape tourism in different parts of the United Kingdom?

In closing, as I said in my opening remarks, we will be supporting this measure. While I hope the Minister can provide clarity on the questions I have posed, I thank the Government for bringing forward this Conservative measure.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I now call Lloyd Hatton to make his maiden speech.

3.59 pm

**Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak during today’s important debate.

I wish to begin by taking the opportunity to thank my constituents for choosing change and putting their trust in me at the ballot box this summer. This was indeed a “change” election. The last time that a Labour MP for South Dorset stood here and made his maiden speech, I was just six years old. But my Labour predecessor—Lord Knight—did not waste any time winning my support. As the local MP, Lord Knight relentlessly fought for my community, and he leaves behind a legacy of which we can all be proud. His

successes include rebuilding my dilapidated primary school and then rebuilding my secondary school as well. Lord Knight was also at the heart of the campaign to win the 2012 summer Olympic games bid, with Weymouth and Portland proudly hosting the sailing events. I consider myself very fortunate to have one of my predecessors working just along the corridor in the other place. This Palace of Westminster is an ancient and sometimes mysterious workplace, so I will always be grateful for my Lord Knight in shining armour just around the corner.

I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my immediate predecessor, Richard Drax. As our MP, his commitment to our armed forces community was second to none. The constituency may have changed hands, but I fully intend to continue his work championing our armed forces.

If I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would also like to pay tribute to another former Member of this House, Baroness Hodge. Many Members will, like me, have worked alongside Baroness Hodge. Working with her is certainly an unforgettable experience. “Relentless”, “feisty”, “ferocious”, “attack dog”—these are just some of the terms bandied around the staffroom at Amazon headquarters after only the briefest of cross-examinations by Baroness Hodge, and with good reason. She exemplifies how to be an effective and tenacious change-maker in Parliament. For more than a decade, she has been the scourge of tax-dodgers and kleptocrats, white-collar criminals and oligarchs alike. It was a pleasure to work alongside her in the battle against dirty money and economic crime. I look forward to continuing her important work, both in this place and on the Public Accounts Committee.

Before I take Members on a walking tour of my constituency, I would just like to say thank you to the people who got me here. My parents, my wider family, my friends and my partner have always had my back. They have always supported my endeavours, and they have given so much to ensure that every opportunity was made available to me. Thank you.

There is something deeply personal about being able to represent your home. It is an honour to be able to represent my friends, my family, my neighbours and my former classmates. In the years ahead, I look forward to rigorously standing up for all the communities that make up South Dorset.

Madam Deputy Speaker, wherever you look across my constituency, a strong sense of community and local pride is unmissable. Starting our stroll in the east of my constituency, we will find Studland and then Swanage, a small, charming seaside town. The people of Swanage have much to be proud of, including the legacy of one Trevor Chadwick. Trevor was a public-spirited man, a local schoolteacher and a lifeboat volunteer. In 1939, he joined Sir Nicholas Winton to assemble the Prague Kindertransport. Despite the clear dangers facing him, Trevor went to Prague to help rescue 669 children from the Nazi regime, yet, much like Sir Nicholas Winton, Trevor did not seek praise or recognition for his heroism, and for many years his work went unmarked. There now stands a statue in Swanage marking his proud legacy. Walking past it just the other day, I was reminded of the quiet selflessness and compassion that sits at the heart of all our communities. We can all learn from his example.



The town of Swanage is also rightly proud of its many independent businesses, its award-winning beach and its essential community hospital. Without these institutions, the town would be lost, so I look forward to advocating for all three at every opportunity.

Now, Madam Deputy Speaker, moving west on our walk along the coastline of my constituency, you are spoilt. Whatever other Members might claim, I know that my constituency truly is the most impressive, the most spectacular, and the most charming. If you do not believe me, just ask UNESCO. My constituency is the proud home of the Jurassic coast: St Aldhelm's Head, Chapman's Pool, Bacon Hole, Lulworth Cove, Durdle Door and Ringstead bay are all geological gems dotted along the coast. Most hon. Members have probably already visited this part of my constituency, either on a romantic weekend away, a summer holiday or an ill-fated geography field trip many moons ago. Either way, all who visit the Jurassic coast leave with lifelong memories. Rural communities such as Corfe, Worth Matravers, Langton Matravers, Winfrith and Wool are all proud to call the Jurassic coast our back garden. I will do all I can to defend, preserve and enhance that unique landscape.

Ambling further west, we arrive at the friendly seaside town of Weymouth. Weymouth and nearby Portland were a key departure point for the Dunkirk evacuation and, later, the D-day landings. My home town was a generous home to soldiers, sailors and airmen during the second world war. In the months prior to D-day, Weymouth hosted thousands of British and allied forces as they prepared for the liberation of Europe. In Weymouth we do not easily forget the importance of those D-day landings, and our town is proud of the role that we played in turning the tide against fascism. In a world that often feels insecure and riven by conflict, our community will always remember the sacrifices made to defend democracy and freedom.

Weymouth also remains proud of a local parliamentarian, Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton. In the early 19th century he was a Member of Parliament for Weymouth and a leading member of the abolitionist movement. Alongside William Wilberforce, Buxton led efforts to abolish slavery throughout the British empire. Wherever I go in Weymouth, there are quiet reminders of that important figure and the role he played in making the world a more civilised place. We are proud of his legacy and I believe we are a kinder and more caring community because of it.

Weymouth is a fantastic place to call home, but that does not mean our town is without its challenges. Growing up there the message I too often heard was that to get on, you had to get out. I reject that outlook altogether. I am proud to call Weymouth home and I will do everything I can to attract the jobs, investment and opportunities that every young person there deserves.

Arriving at the westward end of our walk through my constituency, we find the Isle of Portland, but we do not need to visit Portland to appreciate its significance. Parts of this Palace of Westminster were built using Portland limestone. The Cenotaph and Whitehall were also constructed using that stone, as were the United Nations headquarters and much of Buckingham Palace.

We are proud that a part of Portland can always be found in the corridors of power, yet Westminster and Whitehall can too often feel remote and far removed

from life on the island. I will always stand up for the proud communities living in Portland, and I will do what I can to shrink the gap between communities and the corridors of power. I have begun by working with the Government to shut down the Bibby Stockholm barge, and I will continue by challenging proposals to build an incinerator and by campaigning for improved healthcare and much-needed green investment.

Well, there you have it, Madam Deputy Speaker: a short ramble across South Dorset, all enjoyed from the comfort of these green Benches. The countryside and coastline, the towns and villages that make up my constituency are brimming with pride and with strong communities. It is an immeasurable honour to represent each and every one of them, and I shall seek to serve them first and foremost in this House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.8 pm

**Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD):** I congratulate the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) on his excellent maiden speech; I have indeed enjoyed many family holidays in his constituency.

I am pleased that we are having this debate today and that the Liberal Democrats are supporting this measure. We have been calling for action on single-use vapes for some time. Single-use or disposable vapes are a menace and the evidence for banning them is clear and overwhelming. It is staggering that each week more than 5 million disposable vapes are discarded in the UK, posing significant environmental and public health challenges and littering our streets, countryside and beaches. The devices, which are difficult to recycle because of their lithium-ion batteries, are a growing threat to wildlife and waterways. It is crucial that our waterways, including the River Itchen, the rare chalk stream that runs through my Eastleigh constituency, are protected.

The Rivers Trust has found that the electric components in disposable vapes release chemicals and heavy metals as they degrade, severely threatening life in our rivers. As the Minister highlighted, batteries can, when improperly disposed of, cause fires in waste and refuse lorries, which puts additional strain on local services and poses safety risks. Together, the disposable vapes discarded in a year could provide enough lithium to power over 5,000 electric cars. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has raised serious concerns about the impact of carelessly discarded disposable vapes on animal welfare, as the risk of ingestion or habitat disruption poses a risk to wildlife.

Although vapes have an important role to play in smoking cessation, single-use vapes present unique risks for children and young people. Marketed with colourful packaging and a choice of flavours, and at far lower prices than traditional cigarettes, they are particularly appealing to under-18s. According to public health charity Action on Smoking and Health, 18% of 11 to 17-year-olds have tried disposable vapes. I hope that the Government will also address the concerns of the Mental Health Foundation that those with mental health issues are more likely to use disposable vapes. The trusts that provide them with care, including cessation services, should be properly supported in the transition.

[Liz Jarvis]

We face an escalating crisis that affects our planet and the next generation. Young people are our future and we owe them swift and meaningful action. The Liberal Democrats support the measure, but we hope that the Government will ensure that the ban is effective and that manufacturers and retailers will play their part. There must be robust regulations and investment in cessation services, and the health of our communities must be prioritised. I hope that the Government will take this opportunity to address these concerns with the urgency that they demand, to ensure a future that protects the health and wellbeing of young people and preserves our environment.

4.11 pm

**Mary Glendon** (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): May I say what an honour it was to hear the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton), and how proud he is to represent his home constituency? I wish him all the best in his parliamentary career.

Vaping remains the most effective tool that the UK has to help smokers to quit. Recent data from ASH shows that in the last five years, 2.7 million hard smokers have used vaping as a mean of quitting. Disposable vapes have played a vital role in supporting smoker transition to a less harmful, accessible and affordable entry-level product. Without such products, there is a real risk that fewer smokers will decide to try vaping as an aid to quit.

There are important concerns about the environmental impact of single-use vapes and their accessibility to children, as has already been mentioned, but the Government will need to be prepared for the inevitable increase in availability of black-market products that is certain to come about because of the ban. An increased vaping black market will pose a greater risk to the environment and to children's health. Current laws already prohibit the sale of vapes to those under 18, and require adherence to environmental regulations, but their enforcement has been minimal. Stronger enforcement of the existing regulations could effectively address the issues without banning disposable vapes outright.

The Government have made the right decision in progressing with a licensing scheme, but the fines for breaching the rules must be higher than £200 per offence. The UK Vaping Industry Association has repeatedly called for fines of up to £10,000, which would help to deter rogue traders from selling products to children, and illegal products more generally. In essence, this is not a ban on disposables; it is a ban on legal and compliant disposables. Illicit disposables, which contain goodness knows what, will continue to be sold, and will even proliferate in popularity, after the ban.

Demand for multi-tank vape products has been growing since the UK-wide disposable vape ban was first proposed in January of this year. The regulations appear to ban very high puff-count devices, but it is likely that from next June, irresponsible manufacturers from overseas will innovate to sidestep that ban; they may possibly make their mesh coils replaceable, so they can continue to sell those products. It would be better for the Government to legislate for "one device, one tank". If the Minister

cannot be more explicit about devices in these regulations, I hope that the Government will address those points in the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

As I say, we must be mindful that vapes have been the most effective tool in helping smokers quit. I hope we can take some heed of that fact and make the regulations work, so that the remaining 6 million smokers in this country move away from cigarettes, most likely with the help of vaping.

4.15 pm

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the maiden speech of the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton). It was an excellent maiden speech—very interesting—and his constituency sounds lovely. Indeed, it sounds almost as lovely as Sleaford and North Hykeham, but not quite. I welcome him to his place, and hope he enjoys his time in the House.

I also welcome the regulations. Some people say that ten-minute rule Bills never become legislation, but today, mine will. On 8 February 2023, I introduced the Disposable Electronic Cigarettes (Prohibition of Sale) Bill. I put on record my thanks for the support of my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), and the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) and for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist), as well as many former Members who supported that Bill. There was then a consultation that showed that the measures in the Bill had broad support in the country. It showed that at that point, 70% of the public supported those measures—a high figure. The Conservative Government then introduced the Environmental Protection (Single-use Vapes) (England) Regulations 2024, which sadly did not pass through wash-up before the general election and therefore did not become law. I am delighted that the current Government are bringing these measures forward, but disappointed that they will not come into effect until June, although I understand the reasons that the Minister has given.

There are essentially two reasons why this legislation is very important: the protection of children, and the protection of our natural environment. When it comes to protecting children, I declare an interest—well, three interests as the mother of three children, but also an interest as a children's doctor in the NHS. As has been said, when vapes were introduced, it was claimed that they were a "stop smoking" device. I would argue that they were introduced as an alternative addiction, but they certainly are not suitable for children. The chief medical officer has clearly stated on a number of occasions that vapes may be better than smoking, but those who are not smokers should avoid using them at all.

Unfortunately, children have been attracted to these devices. It is my view that in some cases, the vaping industry has made them deliberately more attractive to children. I do not see why a middle-aged smoker wishing to quit would need a unicorn-flavoured vape, or one shaped like SpongeBob SquarePants or a teddy bear. They are cheap, disposable, and in my view clearly designed to attract children, which they certainly have done. This risks creating a whole generation of nicotine addicts, and the long-term effects of these devices are unknown. They are causing disruption in schools—eight children at a Sleaford school in my constituency have collapsed following the inhalation of certain vapes.

The protection of the natural environment is important. When I introduced my ten-minute rule Bill, I mentioned in my speech that 1.3 million of these devices were being discarded a week. The latest figure is 5 million, and even that figure is becoming slightly out of date. They are very difficult to recycle, and if they are discarded as litter, they create toxic waste that pollutes our soil, rivers and streams. If they are crushed in a bin lorry, they can cause fires, and have indeed done so.

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that there is a particular issue with the discarding of single-use vapes in our town centres? Most of our councils do not have enough money to keep town centres clean; in Cheltenham, I believe the bill is in excess of £1 million per year. There is a real issue there, not just about the environment, but about public sector finances at the local level.

**Dr Johnson:** I understand the hon. Member's point, but the party responsible for putting an item in the bin is not the council, but the person who has it in their hand. People who drop litter should take responsibility. They should not be doing so in the first place. When I worked with the River Slea clean-up project a year ago, we picked up a lot of these devices from the riverside and the river itself. They are clearly a danger to the environment and should not be discarded.

My hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) talked about his dog Poppy. He has recounted that story to me before, and it horrified me, as a dog owner, that any animal could hurt themselves so badly with a vape. We also heard the Minister talk about tyres exploding; goodness knows what would happen if a poor dog or another animal crushed one of these things in their mouth, so I am pleased that they are being banned.

One of the challenges with this legislation was defining disposable vapes. The Government have defined them as ones that are not refillable and rechargeable. In an ideal world, the industry would accept that, produce the refillable vapes it currently produces and move on. However, there is a great financial interest in these products, and I am concerned that the industry will try to find workarounds and get-arounds to create a nominally reusable, but practically not terribly reusable, product at a price point that means it will be discarded. That would continue the problem, so I ask the Minister to keep these products under review, look carefully for signs of these issues in the way that vapes are manufactured, and legislate if necessary.

The Minister talked about those involved in enforcement being given the resources they need, so will she tell us how much has been budgeted and allocated for enforcement of the new rules?

**Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): Enforcement often falls to local councils' public protection departments. As a councillor in West Berkshire, I led on public protection, and our cupboards were full of illegal vapes that we had seized. I absolutely support the call for resources, but we must make sure that they are delivered to local councils, so that they can employ more enforcement officers. Those officers can get into shops, and into the back of those shops, which is where the illegal vapes are often stored, while the legal vapes

are in the shop window. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is important to get that funding to local enforcement teams?

**Dr Johnson:** I certainly do. One benefit of the ban on disposable vapes is that regardless of whether or not a disposable vape is currently illegal on the basis of its constitution and content, it will now be illegal. It will be much easier to identify illegal vapes, because all disposable versions will be illegal. I also agree that we must get the money to councils to do these things, but employing a new enforcement officer will of course now cost more money. The Government's raising of national insurance contributions and lowering of the threshold at which they are paid will affect councils up and down the country. I do not think the Government have really considered the direct cost to public sector employers, or the knock-on effects where services are contracted out and provided by a third party—a private company or a charity. That third party will, no doubt, pass the costs on to the councils. That is a huge concern.

This legislation is the start of creating an overall package to control vaping and protect our children and our natural environment. I welcome it, and I will support it today.

4.22 pm

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who has brought a lot of knowledge to the debate.

I want to begin by referring to the hon. Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton). The last time I was this close to him was early in July, before polling day, when I was standing in a pub garden overlooking Chesil beach with my good friend Richard Drax. I very much enjoyed listening to his tribute to Richard Drax, who was not only a good friend of mine, but a great servant of democracy. He contributed enormously to the successful campaign to leave the European Union, after which he was a diligent member of the European Scrutiny Committee. He was also extremely active on what was his great love: trying to ensure that we maintain strong defences in our country, and he used his military background to great effect in debates.

However, I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that he is lucky to be here. I have every confidence that, had it not been for the previous Government's intransigence over the Bibby Stockholm, Richard Drax would still have been in this House, so it was with mixed feelings that I listened to what the hon. Gentleman had to say, but I extend a warm welcome to him. I am sure that he and I will do our best to ensure that Dorset continues to improve its provision of good-quality services to all its citizens.

Turning to the subject of the debate, it came as a bit of a disappointment that neither the Minister nor my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) referred much to the unintended health consequences of outlawing disposable vapes. There is already a real problem with illegal disposable vapes—it is estimated that probably one third of vapes are illegal. Those are already bad for the environment, but what will the measures do to address that problem? Not very much, I fear. As I said, it is estimated that some 360 million



[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

disposable vapes got on to the market in the United Kingdom in 2023. I had a briefing from British American Tobacco, which highlights that 4.5 million illegal vapes were seized at the border by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs in 2023. The gap between the 4.5 million illegal vapes seized, and the 360 million estimated to be in circulation, highlights the gravity and extent of the problem, particularly when we extrapolate into the future; the number of illegal vapes could be as high as 1 billion by 2030. That is an enormous amount of income for people engaged in black market trade, people smuggling, and other illicit activities.

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** Does my hon. Friend accept that it is quite difficult for the consumer to establish which vapes are illegal and which are not? One may have thought that going into a reputable supermarket to buy such a product was a surefire way of ensuring that it was safe, but we have heard examples of major supermarkets selling a well known brand of vapes that had more in them than was legally allowed. If we ban disposable vapes, it will become very clear: all disposable ones will be illegal.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** The information I have about the extent of illegal vapes in the marketplace comes from the Government. In their impact assessment for the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, which will be debated in the next fortnight, the Government accept that about 30% of the market is illegal, and that is where I got my figures. My hon. Friend refers to supermarkets. I am not suggesting that there is any illegal activity in supermarkets or among responsible retailers.

**Dr Johnson:** My point was that there have been examples of supermarkets unknowingly selling vapes that did not meet requirements, and it is difficult for a consumer who puts a disposable vape in each hand to identify which is allowed and which is not. As a result of the new regulations, they will be able to tell, because both will not be allowed.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** I am not sure that will help much. My hon. Friend refers to the packaging of vapes, but the number of vapes described as refillable or reusable is projected to increase exponentially over the next several years. The question I asked—I did not really get an answer from the Minister—is what the impact will be of all those refillable or reusable vapes on the environment. The same issues to do with what goes into the manufacture of vapes apply to both disposable and reusable vapes. Why would we need to have 2 billion reusable vapes being sold by 2034 if they are not being disposed of? Just because they are described as reusable does not mean that they cannot be disposed of after one use. My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham made the point that we need to be wary of how the Chinese, who are the leading manufacturers and exporters in this field, may well adapt their products to try to circumvent these regulations. In any event, what they and other manufacturers are producing is a cost on the environment, in the sense that they are using scarce resources.

Let us not be naive: the fact that something is reusable does not mean it is a permanent fixture. For example, in my parents' day, they used to smoke cigarettes through a filter that they held. Even those filters were not permanent. I remember many occasions on which my parents said that they had to get rid of the filter and replace it with another. Do not let us be naive and think that this enormously large number of reusable vape devices that are projected to be sold in 2034 will not end up in landfill.

**Dr Johnson:** I am interested to know: is my hon. Friend trying to argue that the Government should have gone further and banned all vapes, including those that can be refilled?

**Sir Christopher Chope:** I am not suggesting that; I am referring to the impact assessment. The Minister, in responding to my intervention earlier, referred to the statement made yesterday to the effect that a new magic pill will be available on the NHS to enable people to be weaned off smoking and, in particular, the nicotine effects of smoking. When bringing that forward, the Government said that the new pill would be as effective as vaping. They did not suggest it would be more effective, but as effective, thereby recognising the important role that vaping has in promoting public health.

These regulations are being brought forward on the basis of the environmental benefits that will flow from them, but let us be clear that there is little provision for enforcement. Reference has been made to the additional burden on local authorities. Paragraph 183 of the regulatory impact assessment states:

"There will be costs associated with inspection and law enforcement services to support the ban. Trading Standards Authorities (TSAs) would be best placed to enforce the ban, and work will be undertaken with LAs to establish the most effective and efficient way of enforcement."

The impact assessment goes on to calculate that the enforcement costs will be low, because the assumption is

"as per Better Regulation guidance to assume 100% compliance by businesses."

If we make that assumption—in my submission, it is a false one—it can lead to the acceptance of figures from the Government that no additional costs will arise from enforcing these new regulations. I think that is a load of nonsense.

**Max Wilkinson:** The hon. Gentleman is making a number of interesting points, but it is not yet clear to me whether he is in favour of the banning of single-use vapes, or the banning of all vapes, or not. It would be instructive if we all understood a little more of what he is trying to get at in the points he is making, as interesting as they all are.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for listening to the points that I have been making. They can be summed up as: smoking costs lives; vaping saves lives. Therefore, if we can encourage more people to vape rather than smoke, that is to the benefit of public health and the individuals affected, as well as assisting those who suffer as a result of secondary smoking or passive smoking. The consequence, which is accepted by the Government in their impact assessment,

is that by taking these measures against single-use vapes, quite a lot of people who currently use them will go back to smoking.

Vapes have a 65% success rate in enabling people to quit smoking. The chief executive of Action on Smoking and Health said that “scare stories” about young people vaping could be causing the misconception among adult smokers that vaping is at least as risky as smoking. We know that it is not. Compliant vapes do not contain tobacco and do not produce smoke, and vape aerosols do not contain the harmful chemicals found in tobacco smoke. Why are the Government therefore proposing to introduce regulations, which, on their own figures, will result in about 26% of people going from vaping back to tobacco products?

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** My hon. Friend is referring to an important issue. I know that he is concerned about personal responsibility and people’s ability to make their own choices. The Government face something of a choice between the protection of an adult—a former smoker who is now vaping, who will be presented with a choice of going back to smoking, stopping vaping or using a reusable vape—and the protection of children. Surely the protection of children is more important, as adults are free to make their own choices about what they wish to do, as long as it is an informed choice.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** There is already vaping among children. As the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) said, children cannot buy vapes and should not be using them, but if children are going to choose between vaping and smoking, it is better that they should go for vaping rather than smoking. One of the unintended consequences that may flow from the regulations is that, instead of using vaping products, an increasing number of children will go back to smoking behind the bike sheds, or whatever the modern equivalent is.

**Mr Dillon:** I should declare an interest as a vaper. I smoked until my wife was due to have our first son and used vapes to give up cigarettes. I have made my own vape juice—I knew exactly what was going into it—and have also used disposable vapes. I now use a reusable vape. A disposable vape is about £6.99 a unit—or two for a tenner; something like that—whereas my monthly bill with my reusable vape is about £35, so it is cheaper for me to use a reusable vape than disposables, and I can now get the same flavours in a reusable vape as I could in a disposable vape. I am not sure that I agree with the hon. Member on the correlation between removing disposable vapes and the prevalence of children smoking, because nowadays they could use a reusable vape and get the same flavours as in a disposable vape.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** As I understand it, a reusable vape may cost as little as £10, so let us see what happens. However, the Government’s own impact assessment on page 40 expects that 26% of current smokers will revert to smoking or alternative non-vaping products. The figure for recent ex-smokers is that 3% will revert to smoking or alternative non-vaping products. Those two added together show that 29% of current vapers will not transition to reusable vapes. The figures say that 24% of current smokers will transition to reusable vapes. Slightly fewer will do so, therefore, than will

revert to smoking or alternative non-vaping products. It is encouraging that 7% of recent ex-smokers will transition to reusable vapes, whereas only 3% will revert to smoking or alternative non-vaping products. That is significant, but I am concerned about the 29% of current vapers who will be driven back to smoking. Is that a good thing for them or for public health? I do not think that it is.

The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) referred to his background as a smoker and now a vaper. I have to admit to having never smoked or vaped, so I come to this debate with an enormous amount of wisdom and experience on the subject. I am driven by the fact that both my parents smoked very heavily as a result of their experiences in the war—when people were not fighting the Germans, there was not much else to do other than smoke. That was very bad for my parents’ health, as it was for so many people of that generation. I do not wish to encourage people to smoke, but the impact assessment makes no reference to the benefits that will accrue to the tobacco companies and the Exchequer from the increased number of people who will smoke as a direct result of the implementation of the regulations. That is a serious omission.

Earlier, some people said that there is a shortage of information available on this subject. I think that this debate is inhibited, as the one that we are to have on the Bill that will come forward in the next fortnight will be, by the Government’s extraordinary interpretation of the World Health Organisation framework convention on tobacco control, particularly article 5.3, which seeks to ensure that interactions between the tobacco industry and policymakers are conducted transparently. We are all in favour of that, but the article does not apply to interactions between the vaping industry and policymakers regarding vape regulation. I have been told, however, by Imperial Brands, I think British American Tobacco and others that they have been unable to access Government Ministers or officials because Ministers and officials are falsely interpreting the framework convention as prohibiting such engagement. It specifically does not inhibit or prevent such engagement.

I think that it is probably the fault of the Government that, as a consequence, they are not as well informed about the issues as they could and should be. Article 5.3 does not preclude policymakers, elected or unelected, from engaging with the tobacco industry or associated parties. Let us have open dialogue about this, instead of a situation where, as I understand it from talking to somebody from Imperial Brands, efforts by that company to engage with Government officials and Ministers are rejected on the grounds that such engagement would be inconsistent with the WHO framework convention. It would not be inconsistent with it. I hope that one positive thing to come out of the debate will be that the Government will rethink their total lack of engagement with the manufacturers of vaping products. We have some really good manufacturers of vaping products based in this country. Why are we trying to put them out of business and encouraging Chinese manufacturers to run rampant in our marketplace, as they are doing with increasing effect? My plea to the Government, which I hope the Minister will address, is to engage with tobacco manufacturers and companies such as Imperial Brands that are interested in promoting smoking alternatives and vaping.

[*Sir Christopher Chope*]

All the projections are that the amount of vaping going on in this country will increase significantly. That is fine, but please can we try to ensure that we do not drive people back to smoking? That would be really bad for our public health and the national health service. I despair that no one from any of the three Front Benches has addressed the unintended consequences of these regulations on public health.

4.45 pm

**Mary Creagh:** Let me begin by saying how much I enjoyed listening to that interesting debate. I welcome the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) to his place in his new role in the shadow DEFRA team. I send our good wishes to Poppy the dog, after her close encounter with a vape of a disposable kind. I hope that this legislation avoids such encounters in future. I thank the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) for her generous speech in support of this measure.

I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Lloyd Hatton) to his place. There was a chuckle of recognition around the Chamber when we were taken on a ramble of his constituency, through the geological and the geographical. He mentioned the big-hearted people from his gorgeous part of the world. It was my privilege to open a section of the coastal path there in a previous role. I know that he will continue the work of Margaret Hodge in this place in his role on the Public Accounts Committee, and I am sure that his constituents are delighted to have one of their local sons representing them. I was really pleased to hear about his passion for bringing jobs and growth to his area.

Let me address some of the issues raised. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson). As a paediatrician, she is uniquely placed to warn of the dangers of these products. I have not come across a SpongeBob SquarePants vape yet, but who knows what the future holds. I was very distressed to hear of the incident at her local school, where eight children collapsed—I wish those young people and their families well—but it is a striking reminder of the dangers posed particularly by illegal products, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope).

Let me talk a little about recycling and producer responsibility for paying the costs. We know that there is no such place as “away”. These products cannot be put into local rivers; they will always turn up. They will always bleed into the environment, and everything that we do to the environment we eventually do to ourselves. It is important that those responsible for putting vapes on the market are accountable for their disposal. A consultation on reforming the producer responsibility system for waste electricals was held under the previous Government at the end of 2023. We are considering the responses, but we noted near unanimous support for the proposal to create a new category of electrical equipment specifically for vapes in the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations 2013. That would ensure that producers of vapes are properly funding the collection and treatment of those products when they reach the end of their life. We recognise the importance of taking action to ensure that the costs of

recycling these products are borne by those who make them, and we will outline our next steps on this in due course.

To answer the question raised by the hon. Member for Epping Forest on monitoring the ban and its impacts, including in devolved Governments, we will monitor the impacts of the ban, and we will share data and intelligence from Border Force, trading standards and all four nations to ensure effective implementation and that these regulations come in at the same time, so that we do not create an unfortunate internal market.

On disposal of existing stock, the six-month period is to help responsible and reputable businesses—when we regulate, we expect businesses to obey the law of the land, and assume that most people will do so. The period will help ensure that businesses do not have masses of stock to dispose of. Unsold stock will become waste electronics and should therefore be disposed of via routes that avoid the black bin.

Vapes present challenges to recycling, so we need to stem the flow by targeting those that are designed to be used only a small number of times. Reusable vapes are part of a wider shift to the circular economy. I have some sympathy with the hon. Member for Christchurch on the issue of reusable, refillable—and reusable and refillable. We are trying our best not to create loopholes for creative businesses to get around. We have seen more reusable products coming on to the market in anticipation of the ban. We will promote the ban to improve awareness both for the public and retailers. We encourage shops to stop purchasing single-use vapes and to run down their current stocks. We are seeing more vape bins in supermarkets, high street retailers and garages following the changes to take-back requirements that were brought in earlier this year. That will support people to dispose of vaping products responsibly, keeping them off the streets and out of the bins.

The regulations will be subject to regular reviews, which are set out in legislation. We will have a review of enforcement and civil sanctions within three years, and a post-implementation review at least every five years. We are currently collecting baseline data on the wholesalers and retailers of single-use vapes in England to support future assessments. The Department of Health and Social Care monitors current rates of smoking and vaping through various surveys, including the periodic “Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use among Young People” survey and the Action on Smoking and Health annual surveys. We will use both to monitor the impacts on people.

On imports, if vapes are discovered at ports then Border Force can retain the products and alert the local authority’s trading standards officers. If there is evidence that greater intervention is needed at the borders, we will not hesitate to act.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** Does the Minister not share my concern? I understand that only one in 3,000 containers coming into a port like Southampton are inspected. It only needs one container to get through and there might be tens of millions of pounds-worth of vapes in one container.

**Mary Creagh:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. A lot of public services have been run down over the past 14 years. In the Budget, there was an



investment of £75 million in border security command to crack down on organised crime. Gangs often operate in multiple sectors of the economy. We need time for this new approach to intelligence gathering and sharing to bed in.

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mary Creagh:** Can I make some progress? I am just conscious of time. I am very happy to take interventions towards the end, because I might have answered any questions in advance.

Single-use vapes are one form of illicit vapes. The Government are planning to introduce other pieces of vape legislation under the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, as well as the vaping product duty, as part of a cross-Government approach, so we will look at these things in future and focus on intelligence sharing between Border Force, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and trading standards.

Enforcement is critical to effectiveness. We will work closely with the DHSC and the relevant enforcement bodies, but I do take on board what the hon. Member for Christchurch said about size and number of vapes. I picked up an illegal vape on the street outside my home. It was rechargeable but not refillable, and had too many puffs in it to be legal. For those of us who are not vapers, it is a whole world of complexity. I am certainly on a steep learning curve.

The legislation has been drafted to address fears that manufacturers could circumvent the ban, for example by adding a USB port to the end of a single-use device and calling it reusable, but a manufacturer who adheres to these regulations will have produced a reusable vape. That requires batteries that can be recharged, a tank that can be refilled or pods that can be replaced, and a coil—the part of the vape that burns out with use—that can also be replaced. In that respect, we are going further than other countries such as France and Belgium.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) expressed concern about the health impacts. We know that tobacco is a harmful product and is responsible for one in four of all cancer deaths, killing up to two thirds of its long-term users. The Government are creating the first smokefree generation, so that children turning 15 this year, or younger, can never be legally sold tobacco, while not preventing anyone who currently smokes legally from being able to do so. The ban applies not to all vapes, but just to those that harm the environment. There will still be easy-to-use products on the market to help adults stop smoking. The hon. Member for Christchurch mentioned 29% of users reverting to smoking following the ban, but it is incorrect to suggest that it will cause a surge in smoking rates. As stated in the assessment, we expect most single-use vape users to stop smoking or to switch to reusable vapes or non-vape products, including nicotine replacement therapies such as nicotine patches and gum.

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill, recently introduced by the Government, takes strong action to strengthen enforcement on illegal vapes, including new fixed-penalty

notices and new licensing and registration powers, which will act as a deterrent and empower trading standards to act more quickly against illegitimate producers and retailers. In the first instance, a £200 fixed penalty notice will be issued, and alongside that a stop notice may be issued ordering the business or individual to cease the illegal activity. If it is not complied with, an individual will be guilty of an offence and liable for an unlimited fine, or imprisonment of up to six months. The Budget provides for a £70 million investment in local authority-led stop smoking services, so I hope that the Swap to Stop scheme will continue to help adult smokers to ditch their cigarettes for a free vape starter kit.

**Dr Johnson:** The impact assessment has been referred to repeatedly during the debate. I understand that it refers to this piece of legislation only, and not to the wider impact of other measures that the Government have proposed, or that have not completed their parliamentary process. Is that correct? Will an assessment of the effects not need to be done in the round, rather than applying to a specific piece of legislation that is only part of a wider plan to tackle youth vaping?

**Mary Creagh:** My understanding is that the assessment relates to this piece of legislation—I see my officials nodding vigorously in the Box—but if there are any further questions that the hon. Lady would like to ask me following the debate, I shall be only too happy to respond to her in person.

I hope that I have covered most of the comments and questions from colleagues. We are banning a product that is designed almost as a toy, a pocket-money product at pocket-money prices that is intended to appeal to those under 18. This legislation is needed to stop the continued misuse of critical resources and harm to our environment, as well as to support wider measures across government to tackle the increase in youth vaping, and is widely backed by the vast majority of the public and our stakeholders.

I trust that Members understand and accept the need for the regulations, and I commend them to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the draft Environmental Protection (Single-use Vapes) (England) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 23 October, be approved.

## BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

*Ordered,*

That, at this day's sitting, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16(1) (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), proceedings on the Motions in the name of Secretary Jonathan Reynolds relating to Export and Investment Guarantees shall be brought to a conclusion not later than 90 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order; the Speaker shall then put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on those Motions; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

## Export and Investment Guarantees

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** We now come to the three motions on export and investment guarantees. I will call the Minister to move the first motion and to speak to all three motions together. At the end of the debate, I will put the Question on the first motion and we will then take the remaining two motions formally.

5 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** I beg to move,

That the draft Export and Investment Guarantees (Limit on Exports and Insurance Commitments) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 14 October, be approved.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** With this we will take the following motions:

That the draft Export and Investment Guarantees (Limit on Exports and Insurance Commitments) (No. 2) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 14 October, be approved.

That the draft Export and Investment Guarantees (Limit on Exports and Insurance Commitments) (No. 3) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 14 October, be approved.

**Gareth Thomas:** These orders are technical in nature and relate to the capacity of UK Export Finance—which is the operating name of the Export Credits Guarantee Department, the UK’s export credit agency—to support current and prospective exporters. As hon. and right hon. Members will know, UK Export Finance has a mandate to support UK exporters with finance and insurance, helping them to compete internationally. UK Export Finance, or UKEF for short, was established more than 100 years ago and is the world’s oldest export credit agency. Its support has proved crucial to British exporters throughout its existence.

UKEF helps exporters to win international contracts, to fulfil export orders, to create jobs and to get paid. Last year it provided £8.8 billion in finance to support UK exporters, and supported up to 41,000 jobs around the UK as a result. Some 88% of the businesses it supported last year were small and medium-sized enterprises. UKEF provides its finance at no net cost to the taxpayer; in fact, it generates a return for the Exchequer, with £705 million returned to the Treasury over the last three years.

The Export and Investment Guarantees Act 1991, as amended in 2015, confers powers on the Secretary of State to provide finance that is conducive to exports, and to provide insurance in connection with overseas investments. Those powers are exercised and performed through UKEF. Subject to some limited exceptions, section 6(1) of the Act imposes a limit on the aggregate amount of financial commitments that can be made under those powers—in other words, the total size of UKEF’s financial portfolio. At present, the limit stands at 67.7 billion, expressed in special drawing rights. Special drawing rights are an accounting unit for international transactions and were created by the International Monetary Fund; their value is based on a grouping of five major currencies, including pound sterling, the US dollar and the euro. The sum equates to approximately £70 billion at today’s exchange rates.

Why are we seeking an increase? Well, the current limit has been in place since 2015, and UK Export Finance’s portfolio size is now drawing close to it. Were UKEF to reach its limit, it would have to pause its vital financing activity, which, in turn, would cut off its support to prospective exporters. I should note that, in practice, the size of UKEF’s portfolio is subject to a limit set by the Treasury. This limit, called the maximum commitment limit, must be lower than the statutory limit set out in legislation. I am therefore proposing these statutory instruments to increase the commitment limit in section 6(1), and to avoid the future risk of having to turn away applications for UKEF support.

Section 6 of the Act enables the Secretary of State, by order, to further increase the limit by up to 5 billion SDR. The power to make such an order may be exercised on up to three occasions and has not been used before. I am therefore seeking approval of these three orders together, which would allow us to increase UKEF’s statutory commitment limit by 5 billion SDR per order, for a total of 15 billion SDR. Inflation since the limit was last amended and the increasing transaction sizes that the Department is supporting mean that the Department is now approaching that legal limit.

Laying these SIs together is about future-proofing UKEF and giving it sufficient legal capacity to provide certainty for its customers. Again, it is a decision for Treasury Ministers to then confirm the actual commitment limit under which the Department operates. After they have come into force, the three instruments taken together will increase the commitment limit to 82.7 billion special drawing rights, which converts to around £84 billion pounds at today’s exchange rates.

UK Export Finance is delivering an ambitious five-year business plan that aligns with this Government’s missions, supporting growth and prosperity for UK exporters and their communities across the country, and doing so at no net cost to the taxpayer, but its ability to do so will be at risk without the additional legal headroom that these instruments provide. These changes will therefore allow UK Export Finance to continue meeting its mandate in supporting exports and driving growth—something that I am sure those in all parts of the House will join me in welcoming. I commend these orders to the House.

5.5 pm

**Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con):** I want to start by saying “Exporting is GREAT”, and UK Export Finance, as the Minister just outlined, has done a tremendous job over many decades in supporting great British exporters, so we support these changes to the export and investment guarantees. As the Minister said, we financed £8.8 billion in export support last year, and that helped 650 UK companies to fulfil their potential by growing their overseas sales.

Today, I would like to probe the Government’s attitude towards exports, and I would particularly like to hear the Minister put on record his support for free trade at this time. The UK is now in the enviable position that almost 50% of our products can now be exported tariff-free, thanks to the tireless work done under the previous Government to increase the number of markets that our exporters have access to. That compares with the EU figure of some 27%. Raising the level of exports to a target of £1 trillion would be truly tremendous for

the growth of this country. It would support higher-skilled jobs and raise profitability, productivity and tax contributions, so in the view of the Opposition, the Government cannot do enough to support the growth of exports.

I want to take this opportunity to ask the Minister about specific policies. Will he be continuing the previous Government's programme of having trade envoys around the world helping with the export connections for our exporters? Are the Government planning to take forward the discussions between the previous Government and the previous Trump Administration on a free trade agreement with the US? Will the Government be taking forward the work that was done at state-by-state level to increase trade access for UK exporters into US states?

Turning to the specific measures in front of us today, has the Minister considered amending the Act itself so that the possibility could exist to increase resources by more than the 5,000 million special drawing rights that are currently covered by the legislation? The previous Act says that this mechanism can be used only three times, so I wonder what provisions the Minister has in mind for the next time the Government want to increase support to exporters through UKEF.

As far as other export initiatives are concerned, can the Minister confirm that he will continue to support the "Exporting is GREAT" campaign and the GREAT campaign generally, given the incredibly good feedback that they tend to get around the world? Lastly, can he confirm that he will remain on the side of our exporters, our wealth creators and the many businesses across this country that do so much to raise the prosperity of the United Kingdom?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

5.9 pm

**Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD):** Boosting British exports, especially for our small businesses, is vital to creating jobs and economic growth, and it absolutely must be a strategic priority for the Government. This secondary legislation is a welcome step forward, giving UK Export Finance the opportunity to grow its portfolio of projects to help deliver for businesses across the country.

This measure will be very important to my constituents, as Wokingham is one of the best places in the country to do business, and the Government should continue to help unlock our growth potential. We ranked 15th of 362 local authorities for competitiveness between 2017 and 2021. The gross value added per filled job vacancy was 23.5%, which is significantly faster than the rest of Berkshire and the south-east.

My constituency has great examples of where Government support programmes have delivered success, such as M2M Pharmaceuticals, which won a King's award for enterprise this year. Tomorrow, I am visiting Intersurgical, another great success story for Wokingham business, which designs, manufactures and supplies medical devices. Having grown from seven people in 1982 to upwards of 3,500 employees worldwide, it now exports its products globally. However, I am sure it is deeply concerned about the Budget's impact on maintaining its profitability. I look forward to hearing from the company what more the Government need to do to support its success.

There is certainly more that should be done to boost British exporters and improve Britain's trade policy. To start, the Government urgently need to fix our broken relations with the EU to foster closer co-operation with our largest trading partner. We must cut vast swathes of red tape and reduce the trade barriers that hold back our businesses. For example, the Government should urgently negotiate a veterinary and plant health agreement with the EU to reverse the decline in British agrifood exports since 2019. Securing bespoke mutual recognition agreements for Britain's engineers, architects, lawyers and accountants would also help British businesses across a variety of sectors to secure greater export opportunities. The trade associations I have met made one thing overtly clear: the impact of Brexit is hurting their profits, and we need to fix this mess.

On trade, I hope this Government do not follow the Conservative party's approach of negotiating trade deals in desperation, which led to weak outcomes, as we can see from the results. For instance, the Conservatives failed to guarantee British standards on animal welfare and environmental protections in agreements such as the Australia trade deal, at an especially difficult time for the agriculture sector. Even a Tory former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs described that agreement as

"not actually a very good deal".—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

Parliament never gets a proper say on our trade deals, eliminating the opportunity to stop the Government barrelling ahead with deals that are deeply unpopular.

I respect the Minister greatly, but there is a lot to get right, and to fix from the previous Government. Will he meet me and representatives from Wokingham businesses, such as Bexpirt, which is struggling to secure UK export finance, to hear what they need from his Department? Will he set out to the House the specific forms of scrutiny we will get when the Government conclude the trade deal? Will his Department renegotiate the Australia and New Zealand trade agreement?

5.14 pm

**Gareth Thomas:** I welcome the opportunity to close the debate. I thank the hon. Members for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) and for Wokingham (Clive Jones) for their comments and questions, which I will try to answer before I make some final remarks about the statutory instruments.

The hon. Member for West Worcestershire asked if the UK Government support fair and free trade. I reconfirm our absolute commitment to supporting fair and free trade. We have made it very clear that trade is one of the key planks of the work of the Department. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security, reporting to the Secretary of State, is leading work on a trade White Paper, which we will bring forward in due course. I am sure the hon. Lady will see the Government's commitment to fair and free trade reflected in that document.

As the hon. Lady knows, when we were in opposition, we supported accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. We are working to agree a number of free trade deals, for example with Switzerland, India and South Korea. She asked me about the trade envoys programme. We are



[Gareth Thomas]

sympathetic to such a programme continuing. We are looking at it closely, as she would expect, and we will bring forward an update to the House in due course.

The hon. Lady asked me about our views on trade with the United States. We recognise that the US is already a key export market for many British firms, and we want to look at all opportunities to increase trade with the US. I will come back to legislative reform more generally, but she is right to underline the message that we have to be on the side of wealth creators in this country if we want to see growth, more jobs and better pay for those in our communities. Winning export orders is fundamental to delivering growth, so a substantial amount of time in the Department is being spent thinking through what else we can do to support British businesses to win export orders overseas. UK Export Finance is one part, but not the only part, of that story, and we will bring forward our plans in due course.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin:** I understand that Crawford Falconer, who had been in charge of a lot of the trade negotiations, is leaving the Department. Will the Minister tell the House what his plans are to fill that role?

**Gareth Thomas:** I pay tribute to Crawford Falconer for his work for the Department and the country. He has already fed into the work that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security is leading on the trade White Paper. Others in the Department are actively leading negotiations with a number of countries in support of our free trade negotiations and our ambitions for new free and fair trade agreements.

The hon. Lady asked me whether there is a need for further legislative reform to UK Export Finance. The Secretary of State has instructed UKEF officials to explore how we can increase the organisation's overall financial capacity. That work is under way. We are committed to ensuring that UKEF can support British exporters now and into the future, but these statutory instruments are key in the short and medium term to helping it to continue to do its job.

The hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) gives me the opportunity to plug International Trade Week, which is taking place this week. I am glad to see that he at least has taken the advice that I wrote out for every Member of the House, encouraging them to reach out to exporters in their constituency, to support what they are doing already and to make them aware of further help that the UK Government could give them to win new export orders overseas. One message that we have sought to get across during International Trade Week is that we are absolutely committed to a reset in our trade relationship with the European Union. There is no doubt that the poor-quality trade deal with Europe that the previous Government negotiated has held back many British businesses from winning export orders in Europe. We need to reset the trade relationship with Europe in very practical terms. We committed, for example, to negotiating a sanitary and phytosanitary agreement, and to exploring more opportunities for mutual recognition of professional qualifications. We see next year's trade and co-operation agreement review as another opportunity to look at what we can do to reduce the difficulties that businesses face in trading with our nearest neighbours.

The Conservatives talked down the opportunities for British businesses to win export orders in our nearest overseas markets. That was a huge mistake; businesses have told us so. We are actively looking at what we can do to change that.

If the hon. Member for Wokingham gives any message to the representatives of the company that he is visiting tomorrow, let it be this: please encourage them to look again at Europe. We recognise that there are difficulties, but we want to work with business to sort them out, because we genuinely believe that there are real opportunities. He asked whether I would meet him and representatives from Wokingham businesses. I would be very happy to. In that spirit, I commend the draft orders to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## EXPORT AND INVESTMENT GUARANTEES

*Resolved,*

That the draft Export and Investment Guarantees (Limit on Exports and Insurance Commitments) (No. 2) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 14 October, be approved.

That the draft Export and Investment Guarantees (Limit on Exports and Insurance Commitments) (No. 3) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 14 October, be approved.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

## Business without Debate

### UK YOUTH PARLIAMENT

*Ordered,*

That this House agrees that the UK Youth Parliament shall be allowed to meet in the Chamber twice in 2025 and then once a year for the remainder of this Parliament.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

That the draft European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (Further Payments to Capital Stock) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 7 October, be approved.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

*Question agreed to.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),*

#### TELECOMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Radio Equipment (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 9 October, be approved.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

*Question agreed to.*

### BACKBENCH BUSINESS COMMITTEE

*Ordered,*

That Jess Brown-Fuller be a member of the Backbench Business Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

## NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY (JOINT COMMITTEE)

*Ordered,*

That Mike Martin and Edward Morello be members of the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

## HUMAN RIGHTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

*Ordered,*

That Alex Ballinger, Juliet Campbell, Afzal Khan and Alex Sobel be members of the Joint Committee on Human Rights.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

## PETITION

### School Transport in North Yorkshire

5.25 pm

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I rise to present a petition on school transport in North Yorkshire.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that North Yorkshire Council's recent decision to limit free school transport to the nearest school only is detrimental to rural families; further that it will divide communities, harm local schools and risk children's safety by requiring travel on remote, often impassable routes; notes that there is no guarantee of significant financial savings; and further declares that councillors should rethink and reverse this damaging policy in the light of the negative impact it will have on the safety and education of children across rural North Yorkshire.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with North Yorkshire Council to reallocate funds to reverse the Council's decision to limit free school transport for pupils to the nearest school to their home address.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003019]

## Infant Formula Regulations

*Motion made, and Question proposed,* That this House do now adjourn.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

5.26 pm

**Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): I am grateful to have secured my first Adjournment debate on an issue that affects so many families in my constituency and across the country: the cost of infant formula and the regulations that govern its sale.

The infant formula market is rightly highly regulated, and should remain so. Regulations have a key role in supporting public health goals and breastfeeding. However, not all parents can or want to breastfeed, and recent stats show that 95% of babies in the UK have had some formula by the age of nine months. As the father of a nine-month-old baby, I know how emotionally charged and difficult it is to navigate infant feeding. The infancy period is crucial for a child's development. In their first year, they will triple their birth weight, and the foundations of their health are determined for the rest of their life. It is vital that parents have access to safe and affordable food during infancy. The fact that, for too many families, that is not the reality is a public health crisis.

Recent data from YouGov shows that one in four mothers are struggling to afford formula milk. Over the past two years, the price of the cheapest brand of formula has risen by 45%, with an average price hike across all brands of 25%. Those increases are putting immense pressure on families.

**Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for bringing forward this important debate and allowing me to intervene briefly. A recent Competition and Markets Authority report highlighted the insufficient marketing regulations in the formula industry, which enable brands to exploit vulnerable parents by presenting their products as distinct or superior, despite all formulas being required to meet the same nutritional standards, whether the box costs £7 or £14. Does he agree that an NHS-branded formula in plain packaging could be considered? It could be sold at cost price. That would give those families who choose not to, or who cannot, breastfeed confidence that their decision is best for their child, regardless of the cost.

**Chris Webb:** I completely agree, and I will come to that later in my speech. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady and other members of the all-party parliamentary group on infant feeding when it is established in the coming weeks.

In my constituency alone, where child poverty has increased by 30% in the past year, 12,500 children are going without enough food each day. Formula is an essential product for many, but the average tub now costs a staggering £14.50, so many parents are resorting to extreme and unsafe measures to feed their babies. A black market has sprung up for infant milk, and it is one of the most commonly shoplifted items. Rather than working to reduce its cost, some supermarkets have resorted to locking formula in cages or attaching security tags to it. Certain stores have even gone as far as to prevent customers from entering unless admitted by staff—that is happening in convenience stores across my constituency.

[Chris Webb]

We are seeing something that should be unthinkable in modern Britain: formula foraging. I regularly read heartbreaking posts on local forums from parents begging for baby milk to tide them over until the next payday—they are in utter despair—but by seeking out cheap or free milk online, they risk feeding their babies a product that could be out of date or already opened and potentially laden with bacteria. Studies have shown that the inability to afford formula can lead to unsafe feeding practices such as skipping feeds, ignoring expiry dates, and over-diluting powdered formula or bulking it out using unapproved alternative foods such as porridge, all of which can harm an infant's health.

New NHS England figures show a worrying rise in childhood malnutrition. Up to 47% of hospitalised children are at risk of undernourishment. Last year, admissions for malnutrition at Blackpool teaching hospitals had almost doubled on the previous year. Gastroenteritis has become an alarmingly common illness in infants, with many now suffering more than one episode a year. In Blackpool, hospital admissions for under-ones with gastrointestinal problems are almost triple the national average. Dehydration—a common complication of gastroenteritis—is a particularly serious risk, and it is exacerbated by parents' inability to access or properly prepare formula. Parents should not be forced into those dangerous choices when they are simply trying to feed their babies. This scandal demands the urgent attention of the House.

**Mrs Sarah Russell** (Congleton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this horrendous issue. A related issue is the broader regulation of baby foods. Many baby foods contain more sugar per 100g than Haribo sweets, and there is no compulsory regulation of their content. Large numbers of children eat those baby foods but are still malnourished and do not get a balanced diet. Does he agree that we should consider wider regulation of, and mandatory standards for, the content of baby food, while still being mindful of the need for baby foods to be affordable so that everyone can access proper nutrition for their children? Children in the UK are becoming shorter on average than their international peers, and that is a disgrace.

**Chris Webb:** I agree. We know from recent studies by the Jamie Oliver Food Foundation and others that this is a serious issue that must be considered urgently.

Last week, the Competition and Markets Authority published its long-awaited interim report on infant formula. The report outlines its concerns about the market, all of which appear to be contributing to parents paying over the odds.

The regulations on the advertising and labelling of infant formula are rightly designed to protect parents and encourage breastfeeding. UK law is informed by, but not identical to, the World Health Organisation's international code of marketing of breast milk substitutes. Our regulations cover only infant formula intended for babies under six months old. That loophole in UK regulation permits hidden marketing through carelines and the widespread legal advertising of follow-on milk—an unnecessary product that does little more than promote higher sales of a brand's infant formula. I urge the

Government to consider strengthening UK regulations to close the loophole on the marketing of breast milk substitutes, in line with the WHO code.

However, strong regulation should not hinder affordable access to infant milk. Parents are worse off because the current regulations mean that food bank vouchers, loyalty points and store gift cards cannot be used to buy infant milk, and food banks are prohibited from stocking it. As a volunteer for Blackpool food bank for over seven years, I have witnessed at first hand how urgently it is needed. For too long, the third sector and charitable individuals have been desperately scrambling to fill the gap that the previous Government left wide open and allowed families to fall into. When it comes to infant formula, even that safety net has been removed. I recently met Richard Walker, the chairman of Iceland Foods, who shares my commitment to ensuring there is a fair price for formula for parents. Along with over 100,000 signatories to the *Metro* and Feed UK's "Formula for Change" campaign, I support the call to allow parents to use food bank vouchers to buy infant milk.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): In the last Parliament, I was a member of the APPG on infant feeding and inequalities alongside Alison Thewliss, a former Scots Nats Member. I am very pleased that this issue is being debated, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) on securing the debate. Does he agree that, while we can all acknowledge the well-documented benefits of breastfeeding, it simply does not work for some mothers, and sometimes the baby does not put on weight? While breast is undoubtedly best, we need to ensure that formula is available and is highly regulated, but not highly costly, in order to provide the best possible alternative. That means not pretending that formula does not exist, but doing all we can to ensure it is the best that we can offer when breastfeeding fails.

**Chris Webb:** I completely agree with the hon. Member. I have seen that with my own son, who would not take to breastfeeding, so we had to resort to infant formula. We need to make sure that all parents have the best product available for their children to ensure they have the healthiest start to their lives.

I ask the Government to examine the fact that food bank vouchers cannot be used to buy infant milk, to ensure the regulations do not punish the very people they are designed to protect.

The CMA report recommends potentially relaxing regulations to permit promotions and price reductions and incentivise competition. However, although discounts would benefit parents in the short term, there needs to be a sustainable solution to permanently lower the price of formula. The infant milk market in the UK is highly concentrated, with just three manufacturers accounting for over 90% of supply. Formula manufacturers have blamed rising costs, but profit margins have inflated beyond them. Those firms pass responsibility to the retailers, who they say ultimately set prices. This is not just passing the buck, but taking it from the pockets of struggling parents to line those of monopolistic multinational conglomerates whose combined annual profits are £15 billion.

Retailers do have their part to play, though. They must do their bit to protect families by capping their prices in line with the CMA report's recommendations.



In the coming weeks, I will meet with three major supermarkets to encourage them to cap prices and follow the lead of Aldi and Lidl in developing a reasonably priced own-brand infant formula. The cost to parents of buying the most expensive brand can add up to £1,000 a year—more than twice as much as using an own-brand infant formula. That is despite the fact that strict regulations ensure that these products are nutritionally equivalent.

Parents naturally want to do the best for their baby, and decisions about feeding are inevitably made at a time when mothers and fathers are at their most vulnerable. The CMA report points out that this can lead to them actively choosing a more expensive product, assuming incorrectly that a higher price means better quality. That assumption is not based on price tag alone, but on decades of brand-building by manufacturers trying to claim the superiority of their products. The important public health message that all infant formula meets a baby's nutritional needs must be more effectively communicated. The Government must also consider the CMA's recommendation that they procure infant formula themselves, providing it to parents at a lower price point while putting downward pressure on other manufacturers' prices.

Prices remain unjustifiably high, but Iceland's leadership in this campaign has led to a welcome reduction in prices across the sector. Since February, there has been a positive shift, and there are now three formula products available in supermarkets that are affordable with the Government's weekly Healthy Start vouchers, but those supermarkets are not accessible to everyone. Blackpool has the fourth highest uptake of the Healthy Start scheme, but around 150,000 families nationally who are entitled to access it still do not. There is a clear need for us to ensure that all those who are entitled to Healthy Start vouchers access them, while simultaneously increasing their value from £8.50.

This is a matter of huge importance, and I am pleased to have been given the opportunity to raise it in the House. I urge the Government to consider my points and to work with me and stakeholders to ensure that accessibility and affordability are at the heart of the Government's policy on infant formula. We must examine the comprehensive recommendations in the CMA's report and the views of those in public health and the third sector, who understand the urgency of this debate. I invite Ministers to consider the voices of parents in Blackpool, who are at the sharp end of this price crisis, but who are brilliantly supported by our local infant feeding support team.

Raising a child is one of the most challenging and demanding things we will do in our adult lives. The Government's policy must lighten the load on parents to ensure that it can be one of the most rewarding things we do. We must ensure that every child in this country has a healthy start to life; we cannot allow children in constituencies such as mine to be failed before they have even taken their first step.

5.40 pm

**The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock):** I thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) for securing this debate on such a vital matter. He is a true champion for his constituents,

and he is rightly concerned about people and families in his constituency who are struggling with the cost of living. I am aware that his constituency experiences high levels of deprivation, which creates challenges for the people who live there.

After 14 years of Tory neglect and incompetence, this Government are committed to improving the lives and health of everyone. However, as my hon. Friend will be all too aware, we have a significant challenge on our hands in transforming our health services so that they work better for the people who need them. When we came to office on 4 July, we made it clear that we would fix our broken NHS. We commissioned Lord Darzi, who published a report that laid bare the true extent of the challenges facing our health service, giving us the frank assessment we needed in order to face those problems honestly and to do the hard work required to fix them. That is why, in the Budget, we announced an additional £25.7 billion of health spending over this year and next.

However, investment works only if it is coupled with reform. That is why we have launched our 10-year health plan, which will address the root causes and fix the foundations by investing in preventive care, expanding mental health services and modernising NHS infrastructure to radically reform the NHS based on three seismic shifts: from hospital to community, from sickness to prevention and from analogue to digital. Our health mission also aims to reduce the time people spend in ill health by tackling health inequalities and driving economic growth.

My hon. Friend will be aware that children are at the centre of our health mission and that we are committed to raising the healthiest ever generation of children. Infant feeding is critical to a baby's healthy growth and development. We are committed to giving every child the best start in life, and that includes helping families to access support to feed their baby. The family hubs and start for life programme is central to that. Through that programme, 75 local authorities across England are improving their infant feeding support for families, including breastfeeding support. Those services are helping parents to access face-to-face and virtual support whenever they need it, and in a location that suits them, be that in their home, their family hub or a hospital setting. We want to build on the actions that local areas are already taking through the programme, so that families can access the support they need when they need it to meet their infant feeding goals.

Breastfeeding has significant benefits for mothers and babies, but breastfeeding rates in England remain low compared with those in other countries. Data shows that around 53% of babies were breastfed at six to eight weeks, but that that dropped significantly by six months. My hon. Friend will know that in response to concerns about breastfeeding internationally, the World Health Organisation instigated an international code to promote breastfeeding and restrict the inappropriate marketing of breast milk substitutes that can discourage breastfeeding. The UK Government are absolutely committed to implementing that code.

Although breastfeeding has significant health benefits, we recognise that it is vital that families who cannot or choose not to breastfeed have access to infant formula that is both affordable and high quality. The price of infant formula has been brought back into the spotlight

[Stephen Kinnock]

with the publication of the Competition and Markets Authority's interim report last week on competition in the infant formula market. It highlighted the fact that the price of some infant formula has increased by more than 25% in recent years, and as my hon. Friend pointed out, parents and carers have had to bear the brunt of those price increases.

The Government's infant formula regulations do not set the price of infant formula, which is agreed by infant formula manufacturers and retailers. Instead, they ensure that parents and carers have access to the highest quality and safe infant formula. The regulations cover infant formula and follow-on formula, which covers the first 12 months of a baby's life. They require all infant formulas to comply with robust nutritional and compositional standards, meaning that they meet all the nutritional needs of babies, regardless of price or brand. However, the regulations rightly restrict the inappropriate marketing and promotion of infant formula. That is because there is considerable evidence that advertising directly to the consumer influences people's decision on how to feed their babies.

My hon. Friend has raised questions about loyalty card points and vouchers from food banks or local authorities being used for purchasing infant formula. The regulations seek to restrict inappropriate marketing techniques that induce the sale of infant formula, including special sales or discounts, so as not to discourage breastfeeding. Loyalty card points on their own are not contentious within the infant formula regulations, and the regulations do not specifically mention them. I agree that consumers should be able to use their loyalty card points to achieve a saving on their shopping. However, my hon. Friend will be aware that numerous loyalty and reward card schemes are available, and they vary significantly between retailers. Some may offer special discounts beyond awarding loyalty points. Loyalty card points should not be used as an incentive or as a reward to purchase infant formula. There is unlikely to be a one-size-fits-all approach, and it is for businesses to ensure that their activities are in compliance with the regulations.

My hon. Friend asked about food banks, and I wish to be clear that the regulations do not prohibit infant formula from being distributed via food banks, including where they may issue vouchers to families. Food banks set their own policies on whether to distribute infant formula. I recognise the important role that they play in supporting some of our most vulnerable families. We have published guidance to businesses on the regulations, and can provide further clarity on those issues where needed.

My hon. Friend rightly mentioned the CMA's report, and I wish to address that in more detail. The CMA looked at competition across the infant formula sector, including the regulatory framework, consumer behaviour and manufacturer behaviour, and it assessed the impact on market outcomes. It concluded that multiple factors are resulting in poor market outcomes for consumers, including the behaviour of infant formula manufacturers and retailers, and that those require a response beyond the regulations alone. The CMA has been clear that it recognises the public health importance of the regulations, and that they ensure that all infant formula is suitable

for meeting the health and development needs of babies, regardless of price. However, it suggests that restrictions in the regulations on price promotions may be softening competition on prices, and it is also concerned about enforcement of the regulations.

Furthermore, the CMA is concerned that parents and carers are not being provided with sufficient information to make well-informed choices, and that their choices are often made in vulnerable situations after giving birth in healthcare settings. In these circumstances, they are unable to make choices that best meet their needs and budgets. The CMA has other market-based concerns about infant formula being indirectly promoted by infant formula manufacturers via the marketing of follow-on formula and growing-up milks, and about how statements on products may influence parent and carer choices.

To understand how the visibility of products online, in-store and in hospitals drives choices, the CMA commissioned qualitative research, which it published alongside its interim report. We will be carefully considering all the issues and options put forward by the CMA as it develops its final recommendations for Government early next year.

I understand that many families are struggling to meet the cost of feeding their baby, and the Government are committed to helping families most in need to access support. The Budget announcement on extending the household support fund will help those facing financial hardship with the cost of essentials. The Government's Healthy Start scheme promotes a healthy diet for pregnant women, babies and young children by providing funds that can be used to buy or be put towards the cost of infant formula, as well as fruit and vegetables, pulses and milk. My hon. Friend has suggested that the value of the Healthy Start scheme should be increased. He may be aware that in April 2021, the value of the scheme increased by 37%.

**Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): The Government have repeatedly said that they will not consider lifting the two-child benefit cap, but as we have been hearing from Members, the cost of infant formula can be prohibitive for parents who are not particularly well off. Will the Minister again consider lifting the two-child benefit cap, which we know is the biggest driver of child poverty in the UK? That would mean that fewer parents face difficult choices when it comes to paying for good-quality food.

**Stephen Kinnock:** When this Government came into office on 4 July, we inherited the worst public finances since the second world war. We were elected on the basis of a manifesto that stated we would return fiscal responsibility and discipline to the management of the British economy. All of that means that we have had to take some hard choices. I do not think that a single member of the parliamentary Labour party wants to have the two-child cap in place, but the reality is that the profound irresponsibility and recklessness of previous Conservative Governments has left us with no choice but to take some difficult decisions. I hope that as we start to instil fiscal responsibility and bring growth back into our economy, we will be in a position to look again at the public finances, but we have to take it one step at a time because of the catastrophic situation left to us by preceding Administrations.

On the Healthy Start scheme, I add that pregnant women and children under four and over one each receive £4.25 a week, and children aged under one each receive £8.50 a week.

I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South for raising this really important matter. I fully appreciate that there is no quick fix to reduce the prices of infant formula, which are set by manufacturers and retailers, but I have outlined the help available

through Healthy Start for eligible families. I want to assure him that we are committed to addressing the concerns raised by the CMA so that the infant formula market delivers the better outcomes that parents deserve.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.53 pm

*House adjourned.*



## Deferred Division

### EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

That the draft Windsor Framework (Non-Commercial Movement of Pet Animals) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 10 October, be approved.

*The House divided: Ayes 412, Noes 16.*

### Division No. 43]

#### AYES

Abbott, Jack  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
Akehurst, Luke  
Alaba, Mr Bayo  
Aldridge, Dan  
Alexander, Heidi  
Al-Hassan, Sadik  
Ali, Rushanara  
Amos, Mr Gideon  
Anderson, Callum  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Aquarone, Steff  
Arthur, Dr Scott  
Asato, Jess  
Asser, James  
Athwal, Jas  
Atkinson, Catherine  
Atkinson, Lewis  
Babarinde, Josh  
Bailey, Mr Calvin  
Bailey, Olivia  
Baines, David  
Baker, Alex  
Baker, Richard  
Ballinger, Alex  
Bance, Antonia  
Barron, Lee  
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
Baxter, Johanna  
Beales, Danny  
Begum, Apsana  
Bell, Torsten  
Bennett, Alison  
Berry, Siân  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Billington, Ms Polly  
Bishop, Matt  
Blake, Olivia  
Blake, Rachel  
Bloore, Chris  
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Botterill, Jade  
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
Brash, Mr Jonathan  
Brewer, Alex  
Brickell, Phil  
Brown-Fuller, Jess  
Bryant, Chris  
Buckley, Julia  
Burke, Maureen  
Burton-Sampson, David  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Caliskan, Nesil  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Campbell, Irene  
Campbell, Juliet  
Campbell-Savours, Markus

Cane, Charlotte  
Carden, Dan  
Carling, Sam  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Chadwick, David  
Chamberlain, Wendy  
Chambers, Dr Danny  
Champion, Sarah  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Charters, Mr Luke  
Chowns, Ellie  
Clark, Feryal  
Coghlan, Chris  
Coleman, Ben  
Collier, Jacob  
Collins, Tom  
Conlon, Liam  
Coombes, Sarah  
Cooper, Dr Beccy  
Cooper, Daisy  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Costigan, Deirdre  
Cox, Pam  
Coyle, Neil  
Craft, Jen  
Creagh, Mary  
Creasy, Ms Stella  
Crichton, Torcuil  
Curtis, Chris  
Daby, Janet  
Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
Darling, Steve  
Darlington, Emily  
Davey, rh Ed  
Davies, Jonathan  
Davies, Paul  
Davies-Jones, Alex  
Davis, rh David  
De Cordova, Marsha  
Dean, Bobby  
Dean, Josh  
Dearden, Kate  
Denyer, Carla  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Dickson, Jim  
Dillon, Mr Lee  
Dixon, Anna  
Dixon, Samantha  
Dollimore, Helena  
Doogan, Dave  
Doughty, Stephen  
Downie, Graeme  
Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
Eagle, rh Maria  
Edwards, Lauren  
Edwards, Sarah  
Efford, Clive  
Egan, Damien  
Ellis, Maya  
Elmore, Chris

Entwistle, Kirith  
Eshalomi, Florence  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
Farnsworth, Linsey  
Farron, Tim  
Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
Ferguson, Patricia  
Fleet, Natalie  
Flynn, rh Stephen  
Foody, Emma  
Fookes, Catherine  
Foord, Richard  
Forster, Mr Will  
Foster, Mr Paul  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Foy, Mary Kelly  
Francis, Daniel  
Franklin, Zöe  
Frith, Mr James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardner, Dr Allison  
Gelderd, Anna  
Gemmell, Alan  
George, Andrew  
German, Gill  
Gethins, Stephen  
Gibson, Sarah  
Gilbert, Tracy  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Gilmour, Rachel  
Gittins, Becky  
Glindon, Mary  
Glover, Olly  
Goldman, Marie  
Goldsborough, Ben  
Gordon, Tom  
Gosling, Jodie  
Gould, Georgia  
Grady, John  
Green, Sarah  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Griffith, Dame Nia  
Hack, Amanda  
Haigh, rh Louise  
Hall, Sarah  
Hanna, Claire  
Harding, Monica  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hatton, Lloyd  
Hayes, Helen  
Hazelgrove, Claire  
Hendrick, Sir Mark  
Hillier, Dame Meg  
Hinchliff, Chris  
Hinder, Jonathan  
Hoare, Simon  
Hobhouse, Wera  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire  
Hume, Alison  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hurley, Patrick  
Hussain, Imran  
Ingham, Leigh  
Irons, Natasha  
Jameson, Sally  
Jarvis, Liz  
Jermy, Terry  
Jogee, Adam

Johnson, Kim  
Jones, rh Darren  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Louise  
Jones, Ruth  
Josan, Gurinder Singh  
Joseph, Sojan  
Juss, Warinder  
Kane, Chris  
Kaur, Satvir  
Kendall, rh Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Khan, Naushabah  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kirkham, Jayne  
Kitchen, Gen  
Kumar, Sonia  
Kumaran, Uma  
Kyle, rh Peter  
Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
Lavery, Ian  
Law, Noah  
Leadbeater, Kim  
Leadbitter, Graham  
Leishman, Brian  
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
Lewin, Andrew  
Lewis, Clive  
Lightwood, Simon  
Logan, Seamus  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
MacAlister, Josh  
MacCleary, James  
Macdonald, Alice  
MacNae, Andy  
Madders, Justin  
Maguire, Helen  
Martin, Amanda  
Martin, Mike  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mather, Keir  
Mayer, Alex  
Maynard, Charlie  
McAllister, Douglas  
McCluskey, Martin  
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
McDonald, Chris  
McDonnell, rh John  
McDougall, Blair  
McEvoy, Lola  
McFadden, rh Pat  
McGovern, Alison  
McIntyre, Alex  
McKee, Gordon  
McKenna, Kevin  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorrin, Anna  
McNally, Frank  
McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Midgley, Anneliese  
van Mierlo, Freddie  
Miller, Calum  
Milne, John  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Mishra, Navendu  
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
Moon, Perran  
Moran, Layla  
Morden, Jessica  
Morello, Edward

Morgan, Helen  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe  
 Mullane, Margaret  
 Munt, Tessa  
 Murphy, Luke  
 Murray, Chris  
 Murray, rh Ian  
 Murray, James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Murray, Susan  
 Myer, Luke  
 Naish, James  
 Naismith, Connor  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Nash, Pamela  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Alex  
 Norris, Dan  
 Olney, Sarah  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Osborne, Kate  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Paffey, Darren  
 Pakes, Andrew  
 Patrick, Matthew  
 Payne, Michael  
 Peacock, Stephanie  
 Pearce, Jon (*Proxy vote cast  
 by Chris Elmore*)  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Perkins, Mr Toby  
 Perteghella, Manuela  
 Phillips, Jess  
 Phillipson, rh Bridget  
 Pinkerton, Dr Al  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee

Platt, Jo  
 Powell, Joe  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Race, Steve  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reed, rh Steve  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rigby, Lucy  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Roome, Ian  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Mrs Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sabine, Anna  
 Sackman, Sarah  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Scrogham, Michelle  
 Sowards, Mr Mark  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Simons, Josh  
 Slade, Vikki  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smart, Lisa  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, rh Sir Julian  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smyth, Karin

Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Sollom, Ian  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo  
 Stevenson, Kenneth  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, Luke  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thomas, Cameron  
 Thomas, Fred  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Thornberry, rh Emily  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turley, Anna  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Karl  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twigg, Derek

Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vince, Chris  
 Voaden, Caroline  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Walker, Imogen  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Welsh, Michelle  
 Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Whittome, Nadia  
 Wilkinson, Max  
 Williams, David  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Woodcock, Sean  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Wrigley, Martin  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Young, Claire  
 Zeichner, Daniel

#### NOES

Allister, Jim  
 Anderson, Lee  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Campbell, Mr Gregory  
 Chope, Sir Christopher  
 Easton, Alex  
 Farage, Nigel  
 Gale, rh Sir Roger

Law, Chris  
 Lockhart, Carla  
 Lowe, Rupert  
 McMurdoch, James  
 Robinson, rh Gavin  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Swann, Robin  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin

*Question accordingly agreed to.*





# Westminster Hall

Wednesday 13 November 2024

[DAME SIOBHAIN McDONAGH in the Chair]

## Facial Recognition: Police Use

9.30 am

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** Before I call Sir John Whittingdale to move the motion, I would like to inform Members that the parliamentary digital communication team will be conducting secondary filming during this debate.

**Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered police use of live facial recognition technology.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I am grateful for this opportunity to debate the police's use of live facial recognition technology. I have to say that this debate is somewhat overdue.

Any fan of Hollywood movies would think that the use of facial recognition technology is widespread, as in "The Bourne Ultimatum" and "Spooks", and that it is commonplace for MI5 and the CIA to tap into CCTV cameras across London. I do not believe that is correct—I hope it is not—but police forces are using facial recognition technology more and more. It was first used in 2017, and it is now commonly used by the Metropolitan police, South Wales police and now my own police force in Essex, which purchased two vans in August and use it regularly.

On 4 October, I accompanied police officers on a deployment in Chelmsford High Street, who were hugely helpful in explaining to me exactly how they use the technology and, importantly, what controls are in place. They told me that they had a watch list of 639 individuals who had been approved by the superintendent and were wanted for questioning in relation to offences such as violence against the person. They included people with outstanding warrants, suspects linked to county lines, suspected shoplifters in that particular part of the county, and those with a sexual harm prevention order.

In the course of the 30 minutes or so that I spent with those officers, they recorded 1,500 faces of people who passed by. The officers assured me that those images were matched against the watch list to see whether they registered a positive, and if they did not they were deleted in less than half a second. During the time I was there, there were approximately 10 positives, which led to a conversation: a police officer would go and have a polite exchange to find out why the person had registered positive, and they were checked against the Police National Computer or Athena. That morning, that led to two arrests.

The chief constable of Essex has written to me and colleagues to emphasise the effectiveness of the technology and its importance to that force. He told me that they had so far had 25 deployments across Essex, resulting in 26 arrests and 26 other positive disposals. He said:

"This cutting-edge technology has enabled us to keep the public safe, and can save time and effort of our front-line, allowing them to do other work to protect and support the community."

**Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab):** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. There are suggestions that this technology disproportionately misidentifies black people and people from other communities. Does he agree that the Government must give us more assurances and ensure that more black people are not criminalised? We know that black communities are over-policed and underserved.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** I certainly agree that more assurances need to be given. That is actually one of the purposes behind requesting this debate. The hon. Lady is right that concerns have been expressed—

**David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con):** I agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson), but it goes deeper than that. There are at least three conditions that ought to apply, and I would be interested to hear from my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) whether Essex met them. First, these things always ought to be under judicial oversight; it should not simply be a police decision. Secondly, as he said, only the records of presumed guilty or actively sought people should be kept and, thirdly, that innocent people's records should be destroyed straightaway. That should not be left to a guideline; it should be under legislative control and properly treated in that way.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** I agree with my right hon. Friend. The problem at the moment is that we do not even have national guidelines. There is a complete absence, which I will come to later. I will give way to the shadow Home Secretary.

**Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con):** I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. I would like to add some context to the question of racial bias. There were allegations of racial bias a few years ago. The system was tested by the national physical laboratory about two years ago and, at the settings used by the police, no racial bias was found. That was one of the conditions set in the Bridges litigation about four years ago, and I hope that gives my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members some reassurance on the question of racial bias. It has been tested by the national physical laboratory.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** As I understand it, the number of false positives recorded depends to some extent on the threshold at which the technology is set.

**Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab):** The report by the national physical laboratory said that it had to be set at 0.6 for it to have fewer misidentifications, but there is no such thing as no misidentifications or people not being wrongly identified. It is also easy for a police service to lower that number. Because we have no judicial oversight, it is very problematic.

**Sir John Whittingdale:** The hon. Lady is completely right. I think the police are generally being responsible in its use and setting the threshold as recommended, but that is another example where there is no requirement

[*Sir John Whittingdale*]

on them to do so, and they could lower it. Regarding deployment in Essex, the chief constable told me there was just one false positive.

I attended a meeting with Baroness Chakrabarti, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington, where Shaun Thompson, an anti-knife community worker, spoke to us. He had been held by the police for 30 minutes and forced to provide all sorts of identity documents, as a result of a false positive. On the extent to which it is occurring and whether racial bias is involved, there is some evidence that that is the case. That makes it all the more important that we provide assurances.

We have heard from several campaign organisations that are concerned about the use. They vary in the extent to which they believe it is a legitimate technology. Big Brother Watch has described live facial recognition technology as

“constant generalised surveillance”

and has said that it is

“indiscriminately subjecting members of the public to mass identity checks”

which undermines the presumption of innocence.

Liberty has gone further, saying:

“Creating law to govern police and private company use...will not solve the human rights concerns or the tech’s inbuilt discrimination...The only solution is to ban it.”

I do not agree with that, because I think there is clear evidence that it has a real benefit in helping the police apprehend people who are wanted for serious offences, but one of my major concerns is the lack of any clarity in law about how it should be used.

I am grateful to the Library, which has provided advice on that point. It says:

“There is no dedicated legislation in the UK on the use of facial recognition technologies.”

Instead, its use is governed by common law and by an interpretation of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, although that Act does not mention live facial recognition technology, and some case law, such as the Bridges case. Even in the Bridges case, the Court of Appeal found that

“The current policies do not sufficiently set out the terms on which discretionary powers can be exercised by the police and for that reason do not have the necessary quality of law.”

**David Davis:** On precisely that point, some police forces in the UK take the view that GDPR has reach in this area. Does my right hon. Friend have a view on that?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** My right hon. Friend has anticipated my next point extremely effectively. I was Minister at the time of the passage of the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill, which did not cover live facial recognition technology. At the same time, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who is the shadow Home Secretary, was the Minister for Policing and he made a speech about how valuable live facial recognition technology was. I therefore sought advice about how that fitted in with GDPR.

The advice that came back following consultation with the Information Commissioner’s Office was that there is no blanket approval by the ICO for the use of LFR technology. Essentially, it should be judged on a

case-by-case basis, but the ICO had expectations that data protection and privacy should be respected. It went on to say that the use of LFR can be highly intrusive and future uses of the technology may require updates, but that the ICO is monitoring it closely. That is only partially reassuring. Essentially, the ICO recognises that breaches of data protection could be possible, and is monitoring it, but there is no clear guideline to assist the police or anybody else with precisely how it should be used.

I am grateful to legal consultants Handley Gill, who wrote to me yesterday and who are involved in advising a number of people about the legality of the technology. They said that

“it is undesirable for individual Chief Officers and PCCs to have to engage in the wide ranging review and preparation of the necessary documentation, and that a move toward a common national approach (and choice of technology provider) would secure efficiencies and also enable closer monitoring...to ensure their efficacy and lawfulness.”

Although we are no longer bound by European Union law, the EU has brought in much more stringent controls than exist here.

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Scotland’s chief constable said in September that it would be “an abdication” of her duty not to assess whether this AI tool could be used and that the force was “very much alive” to it, describing it as a crucial tool to “take violent perpetrators” off the streets. In my view, it is an exercise in balancing the need to tackle crime and keep people safe with the impact the tool may have on human rights and civil liberties. I believe the right hon. Gentleman wishes to introduce stringent restrictions on the use of such surveillance. If so, what are they, and is he seeking to follow similar European states’ legislation akin to the EU Artificial Intelligence Act?

**Sir John Whittingdale:** The EU’s AIA lays down very strong controls—it almost goes too far—in that it restricts the categories of individual who can be sought under the watch list to quite a small number. The House of Commons Library points out that

“the AIA 2024 prohibits the use of ‘real-time remote biometric identification systems’ (such as LFR) in publicly accessible spaces for the purposes of law enforcement, unless such use is ‘strictly necessary’ for one of the following objectives”.

The list it provides includes the search for specific victims of abduction or trafficking; missing persons; the prevention of a substantial and imminent threat to life; the prevention of a genuine threat of a terrorist attack; or the localisation of a person suspected of having committed a criminal offence.

In Europe, the controls are strong, but in this country it is left largely to police officers to interpret the law and be reasonably confident. However, legal challenges are under way. Shaun Thompson, whom I met, is seeking judicial review of the police’s actions and the campaign organisations are also looking at legal challenges. There is a real need for clarity. Certainly, the sergeant of Essex police who is in charge of deployment told me that, in his view, it would be really helpful for the police to have clear guidelines. They would then not have to make those difficult decisions and could potentially satisfy a court that the use was proportionate and justified.

As far as I am aware, this matter has not been debated by Parliament before, and it should have been because there is a real need to seek clarity in the law. This may sound like science fiction, but ultimately there is a risk that it becomes possible for every CCTV camera in the country to be linked up, and there could be a watchlist of not 600 but millions of people. Concerns have been expressed by organisations such as Big Brother Watch—in this particular instance, that organisation could be well named—and I do not think any Member would wish to go down that route. I think most people recognise that there is some value in the technology, but there is a need for clarity. I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary and particularly the Minister for Policing for coming to contribute, and I look forward to what they have to say.

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate, and it seems that everybody does.

9.46 am

**Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale)—or I could say my right hon. Friend, if he does not mind—for securing this debate. I have spoken to the Secretary of State and Ministers in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and there is an awareness that we need a lot of careful and considerate thinking on this issue. Obviously, a new Government have just come in and this is not a new issue, as the right hon. Member for Maldon said—LFR was first used in 2017, so there is a lot of clearing up that has to be done.

Live facial recognition changes one of the cornerstones of our democracy: an individual is innocent until proven guilty. With this technology, if the machine says an individual is guilty because they have been identified using live facial recognition, they then have to prove their innocence. That is a huge change in our democracy that nobody has consented to. We have not consented to it in this place, and as we police by consent as a society, that should really worry us all.

**Chris Philp:** I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; I am looking forward to this debate and to concluding it for the Opposition later.

On the question of changing the burden of proof or undermining the concept that someone is innocent until proven guilty, the technology absolutely does not change that. What it does is give the police a reason to stop somebody and check their identity to see whether they are the person wanted for a criminal offence. It certainly does not provide evidence on which a conviction might be secured. In fact, it is no different from the police stopping someone because they are suspicious of them, and it is a lot more accurate than stop and search, about which I am sure the hon. Lady has views. It is simply a tool to enable the police to stop somebody and check their identity to see whether they are the person who is wanted. It certainly does not undermine the very important principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty.

**Dawn Butler:** The shadow Minister has hit on an important point regarding reasonable suspicion. What is reasonable suspicion? How have the police got to that

point? If he is then going to make reference to watchlists, who is put on a watchlist? We know, for instance, that the Met police has hundreds of thousands of people on its system who should not be there. We know that the watchlist can consist of people it considers to be vulnerable, such as those with mental health issues. Anybody in this room could be put on a watchlist, so I am afraid the shadow Minister has not quite nailed the point he was trying to make.

**David Davis:** I am very much on the hon. Lady's side of that argument, partly because we are a country where it is not normal to stop people and ask for their identity cards, which is why we have had a few battles over that in the past. Also, the technology is prone to slippage. Way back when—probably when the hon. Lady was still at school—we introduced automatic number plate recognition to monitor IRA terrorists coming from Liverpool to London. That was its exact purpose, but thereafter it got used for a dozen other things, without any legislative change or any approval by Parliament.

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** Order. Could I ask Members to keep interventions as interventions?

**Dawn Butler:** Thank you, Dame Siobhain. Yes, it is really important that we talk about this openly. That is what we are supposed to do in this place, right? Anybody can be put on the watchlist. Seven police forces are currently using LFR. One that I know of—I am not sure about the others—the Metropolitan Police Service, is in special measures. I do not think it should be given any additional powers while it is in special measures.

The thing is that we know very little about the software or what is in the black box that is developed by these systems. What we can look at is the outcome, and we know that the outcome does not identify very well black women's faces, especially, and black and Asian people. There is a lower identification threshold for those people, so that is a concern.

It is also really interesting that even when LFR is set at 0.6, a police super-spotter is more accurate. We have specialist police officers who spot people very quickly, and they are more accurate than this system, so it becomes the case that a police service will try to prove that the system it has bought is value for money. We can imagine a police officer not getting many hits with LFR at 0.6 and lowering that to 0.5 so that they can get more hits, which in turn means that more people are misidentified, so there should be regulation around this issue.

Taking away somebody's liberty is one of the most serious things we can do in society, so we need to think very carefully if we are going to introduce something that accelerates that. It is good that for the first time we are having the debate on this issue. As the right hon. Member for Maldon said, the EU permits LFR only where there is prior judicial authorisation and in cases in which the police need to locate a missing person, for instance. That is something we need to consider.

I want to say this: I like technology. I am very much into our civil liberties. We need to protect our digital rights as human beings and individuals. I love technology—I used to be a coder—but we should not rush to do things because people get excited. There are really four people in the debate on this issue. It reminds me of



[Dawn Butler]

four of my mates when we go out clubbing. Bear with me. We have the person who will stay at home because they are not bothered—they do not care—and we have the people who do not care about this issue: “It is going to happen; let it happen.” We have the person who will come, but they are a bit moany. They do not really like the music, but they will come anyway because they do not want to miss out.

We then have the person who is completely drunk on it all: “Give it to me. I’ll take everything.” There are people who just love anything to do with technology and will say, “Look, let’s just throw it all in the mix and it’ll all be fine.” And there is me. I am the person who likes the music and the food, but I need to keep sober to make sure everyone gets home safely. In this debate about AI, we need to be sober to make sure that everybody gets home safely and that when we roll out AI, we do so in a way that is fair and compassionate and in line with our values as British citizens.

9.53 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate on live facial recognition technology, and I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for leading it.

I have to make a confession to the House: I am not technically minded. I can just about use my phone for text messages; I cannot do much else with it. When it comes to TikTok, Facebook, X and all those other things, I am not even sure what they all are. The fact is that my staff do all that, so anything that people see on there from me is because of them. I okay it, but they put it out.

But even if I am not technically minded, I understand the necessity to have technological advances in place and that they can also be used to benefit our police and criminal justice system. I am fully in support of advancements where there is necessity and reason for them, but the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) was right to identify some problems with the system. So my contribution will be in favour of facial recognition technology, but also focused on the need to have a system that does not infringe on human rights.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that our concern for the wider population and individual safety has to be paramount? Allied with that are the necessary safeguards that have to be built in so that safety does not rule out and infringe on the personal liberties of people who have not done anything wrong and are unlikely to do so.

**Jim Shannon:** I agree with my hon. Friend and that point is the thrust of my contribution.

It was incredibly helpful to hear the comments of the right hon. Member for Maldon, and about how he was able to join police forces to see how live facial recognition works. I understand that was the 13th use of the technology by Essex police, with it having been deployed previously in Harlow, Southend and Clacton. Essentially, the equipment works by scanning the faces of all individuals seen by a camera and comparing them to a predetermined watchlist.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) said, safety is paramount—that is the critical reason for using the technology. I speak on human rights issues all the time, as many present will know. I want to make sure that when we have technology in place, human rights are not abused or disenfranchised, and that people do not feel threatened. Innocent people should never feel threatened, of course, but there are those who have concerns. The technology has already proven itself and led to a number of arrests of people wanted for serious offences such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, aggravated burglary and shoplifting.

I will make a quick comment about the Police Service of Northern Ireland and what we are doing back home. A freedom of information request was submitted to the PSNI in late 2022, and it was concluded that live facial recognition is not currently used in Northern Ireland. I was aware of what the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) said when he intervened earlier, because Northern Ireland is in the same place on this. The FOI concluded that it is the intention of the PSNI to explore fully the potential of facial recognition technology, and that a working group was to be established in late 2022, in conjunction with PSNI stakeholders. The principle of why the technology is necessary is already in place, but we need to have the safeguards as well.

Last week I was in a Westminster Hall debate secured by the hon. Member for North Down (Alex Easton) on the importance of funding for local policing. There are clear examples across the United Kingdom that show that live facial recognition works and is extremely beneficial to the prevention of crime and for convictions. Perhaps, then, it is something that could be funded through the Barnett consequential. The Government will tell us that they have set funds aside, and we thank them for the extra money for Northern Ireland, but if it can help the police forces, that needs to be looked at.

Numerous concerns have been raised about the use of LFR by our police forces. Surveys have revealed that the British public are mainly concerned with policy infringements, surveillance, consent and the unethical use of facial recognition by the police. The hon. Member for Brent East said that clearly in her contribution, as have others. Police officers shared concerns that there could potentially be impacts on the legal and human rights of citizens.

I will always speak out on human rights abuses where they are highlighted and where infringements take place. It is good to see the Minister in her place; we all have an incredible respect for her and I look forward to her contribution. I seek to hear from her how human rights can be assured and carefully covered. The invasion of liberty and privacy are of major concern. If the technology is to be widely used across police forces, there must be assurances on public safety.

Concerns about false positives have been raised. I do not pretend to understand the technology, but others have explained that if it is turned down from 0.6 to 0.5, it offers a wider spectrum of people. That can cause such damage to people and their reputations, and reputation is everything for many people. Should this be trialled in the likes of Northern Ireland or Scotland, we must have assurances that the algorithms are correct and that they identify people correctly. I support the technology with that proviso.

10 am

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): Thank you, Dame Siobhain, for your merciful chairpersonship. I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for introducing this crucial debate.

Like many others, I have many concerns about live facial recognition technology, some of which have already been raised, but I will focus my remarks on the room for error and the potential impact that this technology will have on already dwindling public trust in police, particularly among black, Asian and ethnic minority citizens. I will raise points similar to those of my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) and Brent East (Dawn Butler).

Live facial recognition technology compares live CCTV images with those already on the police database and other images taken from open source, publicly available image sites. This is a deeply flawed plan that could result in serious mix-ups. A simple mislabelling on an image database could lead to the wrong person being stopped and a potentially traumatic experience with the police.

I can illustrate my point with a short anecdote; this happened to me a mere few months after I was elected to this House. My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) was speaking in the Chamber. BBC Parliament miscaptioned her as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East and, when they spotted this, both Members took to Twitter to point out the mistake. In their haste to cover the story, the *Evening Standard* incorrectly used a picture of me instead of my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea—I hope everybody is following this—and in its apology to all three of us, it suggested that Getty Images, where they had taken the image from, had labelled most of the pictures of me, since I had been elected, with the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea. Since then, to avoid embarrassment, it seems that most publications now use pictures of me looking like a constipated walrus, but they have said that their reason for this is that they can be sure it is me and they want to avoid any further embarrassment.

Although problematic, that is a far more trivial example of what can happen when images are mislabelled, but if humans can make these errors, the technologies they create obviously can. If online sources are going to be used as part of the image database, it is almost inevitable that images will be mislabelled and that innocent people will be subject to needless run-ins with the police.

Questions around the numerical similarity score used to determine matches also ought to be raised. We already know that facial recognition data has racial bias: it is deeply flawed when attempting to identify people with darker skin tones, just as Getty Images is, and the Metropolitan police's own testing of its facial recognition algorithm identified disproportionately higher inaccuracy rates when attempting to identify people of colour and women.

People of colour are already disproportionately stopped and searched at higher rates, and the use of potentially flawed technology will serve only to increase the rate at which ethnic minorities are stopped, searched and possibly even incorrectly detained, further dampening trust in the police among these communities. We know that that

needs to be resolved. To any Member who thinks that I am exaggerating the potential for misidentification, I say this: in 2023, Big Brother Watch found that over 89% of UK police facial recognition alerts wrongly identified members of the public as people of interest. In that case, what benefits does this technology bring? It has been used in the borough of Lambeth, including in my own constituency, on a number of occasions, but as far as I am aware it has not produced a substantial number of results. Our constituents are effectively being placed under constant surveillance. The notion of their presumed innocence, which sits at the heart of our justice system, has been undermined, and this “cutting-edge” technology has not produced substantial results.

With some 6 million CCTV cameras in the UK, which all have the potential to be converted into facial recognition cameras, we are veering dangerously close to becoming a police state with levels of surveillance that would be deemed acceptable only in the most authoritarian of dictatorships. I believe that our liberty and our security can co-exist. It is not a matter of “those who have nothing to hide have nothing to fear”; it is a matter of the basic principles of freedom and privacy. Those basic principles begin to draw into question what such surveillance is really here for. Is it here to keep us safe or to monitor us 24/7?

Most Members would undoubtedly, I hope, protest at the idea of police randomly stopping members of the public to check their fingerprints or other DNA against databases just for a possible match. Why should we look at this intrusive automated biometric software any differently?

10.5 am

**Shokat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a real pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) on securing this debate and agree with him wholeheartedly that this issue should be considered further in the main Chamber.

It is said that technology is a very useful servant but can be a very dangerous master. Many colleagues have already made a robust case for the use of this technology and undeniably it can be very useful. However, I am extremely concerned and believe that we must proceed with caution. In Leicester, some people already want to use the technology, but we must ensure that there is watertight legislation before we proceed any further.

Among my main concerns is the accuracy of the technology. We must ask whether it is fit for purpose. A spokesperson from StopWatch, a UK coalition of academics, lawyers and activists, has said that

“there is very little evidence on the efficacy of LFR deployments”.

In fact, in the first six months of this year, when this technology was deployed, StopWatch found that on average it stopped one person nearly every hour, or every 55 minutes, and that a person was arrested every two hours because of it. The data showed that, as the hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) said, over 80% of those arrests were unnecessary. The right hon. Member for Maldon said that the police have polite conversations with people, but polite conversations have a different meaning for different people.

[Shockat Adam]

Secondly, there is equality and non-discrimination. We already know that a black person is four times more likely to be stopped by this technology, as we are now. The technology has been shown to exacerbate any racial profiling. In fact, it has been demonstrated that it disproportionately misidentifies women, people of colour and even disabled people. That is a real concern.

Thirdly, as the majority of colleagues have already mentioned, the technology is an attack on our civil liberties. Earlier this year, the European Court of Human Rights ruled against Russia after claims that it had used LFR technology to locate and arrest a protester on the Moscow metro system. That is extremely frightening. Similarly, China has been accused of perfecting a version of facial technology that can single out and track Uyghurs—members of the repressed Muslim community in China.

We must acknowledge these concerns and ensure that, like the EU, we have in place stringent legislation, like the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act 2024, before this technology becomes widely used and turns into our master.

10.8 am

**Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I thank every Member here for coming to this debate and I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for securing it in the first place.

I have worked on this issue for many years. In my previous job, I attended and observed the first deployments of live facial recognition by the Metropolitan police, which is many years ago now. Since then, the gap between its increasing use and the lack of a legislative basis has grown wider and wider. In that time, many thousands of people have had their personal data captured and used by the police when there was absolutely no reason for that. Many people have been misidentified, but the accuracy issue is not my main concern.

The unlegislated use of the technology is incredibly worrying. In my previous job on the London Assembly, I asked the Met and the Mayor of London many questions about that. I asked for watchlist transparency, but I did not get it. I heard the initial promises—"Oh, it will be very transparently used, we will communicate it, and no one will have to walk past it without knowing." All those reassurances just faded away, because there is no real scrutiny or legislation. We need to debate the subject from first principles. As other Members have pointed out, we have had proper debates about identity cards and fingerprint and DNA data, but not about this extremely intrusive technology. It is more concerning than other technologies because it can be used on us without our knowledge. It really does engage our human rights in profound ways.

For all those reasons, the use of facial recognition by the police has been challenged by the Information Commissioner, the Surveillance Camera Commissioner, the Biometrics Commissioner, London Assembly members, of whom I was one, Senedd Members and Members of Parliament here. The only detailed scrutiny of the technology has resulted in calls for a halt to its use; I am thinking of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee. The Justice and Home Affairs Committee has also called for primary legislation. That is the

absolutely key question. The EU has had the debate and looked at the issue in detail, with the result that over there what is used so much by the UK police is restricted to only the most serious cases of genuine public safety. That absolutely needs to happen here.

The legislation needs to look not just at police use of the technology, but private use. I have seen its use by private companies in the privately owned public space in King's Cross. Data from there has been shared with the police; the police initially denied knowing anything about it and then later apologised for that denial. If private companies are collecting data and sharing it with the police, that needs to be scrutinised. If private companies are using the technology, that needs to be legislated for as well.

**Dawn Butler:** The hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful speech. Is she aware of the Big Brother Watch campaign to try to stop large shops from capturing people's faces and saying that they are shoplifters? They then get stopped in other places, but they are not aware of that process.

**Siân Berry:** Yes, I am aware of Big Brother Watch's excellent campaigning on this issue. It has identified a serious breach of human rights. There is the potential for a serious injustice if people are denied access to their local shops based on a suspicion that has put them on a watchlist that may or may not be accurate. There is no oversight. We need to debate these things and legislate for them.

I tabled a written question to the Minister about putting regulation and legislation behind the police use of live facial recognition. The answer stated that the technology is governed by data protection and equality and human rights legislation, and supplemented by specific police guidance. I do not believe that police guidance is sufficient, given the enormous risks to human rights. We need a debate on primary legislation. I hope that the Minister will announce that that process will start soon and that this unlawful grey area will not be invading our privacy for much longer. This issue is urgent.

10.13 am

**James McMurdock** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): I appreciate that we are having this debate, because it is surprising that we have got to where we are without legislation and firm frameworks in place. I really like the phrase "first principles", and one of the first principles of the police is "without fear or favour". That is an exceptional phrase that, if perfectly implemented, we would all benefit from, although of course we recognise that in the real world there is no such thing as perfect.

I am grateful that concerns have been raised about how the technology we are discussing impacts the assumption of innocence—we should all be very careful about that—although I also appreciate the point that it does not impact innocence but provides the opportunity for a human to check. If done properly, that is no bad thing, but we are right to discuss the issue in serious terms in our legislature because there is a danger of an unofficial assumption of guilt. Let us take the example of local shopping centres, which we heard about earlier. If an issue has not been escalated to the police or courts, but some local security officers have seen the same images on cameras and that information has gone round by radio, a gentleman or a lady out with their



children doing the weekly shop may suddenly not be able to get in and do what they need to do. That is the kind of pervasive and damaging thing that could easily slip under the radar; we should all be mindful of that.

I want to touch briefly on transparency. This is clearly a developing technology and we would be wrong not to look at its benefits, but we must be mindful of the harm it could do along the way. If people find that they are getting an unfair crack of the whip—that is probably an inappropriate term—and are suffering as a result of this technology, we need to nip that in the bud, and be very direct and open about the failures so that we can make adjustments.

**Dawn Butler:** Is the hon. Gentleman aware that black men are eight times more likely to be stopped and search by the police than their white counterparts, and 35 times more likely under section 60? This technology accelerates the discrimination that is already in the system.

**James McMurdock:** Absolutely. Let me put it like this: if any of us were to turn up at a social event and unexpectedly find a large swarm of police, that would give us a moment's pause for thought. We need to be careful to ensure that this technology is not a more pervasive version of that example. It must not be constantly in existence, attached to every CCTV camera, without us even being aware of it.

To go back to transparency, we have to be open and frank about any issues with how the technology is being implemented, so that we can fix them. I agree that there absolutely could be issues, and we definitely want to be on the right path.

**Shockat Adam:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this technology could further alienate minority communities—as happened with the Muslim community, which felt unfairly targeted by the Prevent strategy—and could cause further division and mistrust of the police?

**James McMurdock:** This is all about the first principle of “without fear or favour”. If there are any examples of where that is failing, regardless of whether it relates to local behaviour or the broader introduction of a new technology, we need to be open, transparent and mindful. We live in a world in which not everything is done perfectly, but there are some communities with problems that are perhaps not being tackled in the most beneficial way. I do not want to get too deeply into these issues, because I am not an expert and I recognise that they are extremely sensitive, but I think we can tackle them transparently.

The hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) used the excellent analogy of a night out. I completely agree; I was thinking, “Yeah, I'm up for it, but let's just make sure we can all get home safe”, but the more we discuss the issue, the more I think the appropriate camp to be in is, “I could be tempted out, but let's make sure we like the destination.” I will leave it there. I thank hon. Members for their time.

10.18 am

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for securing this important debate.

I have researched this subject and listened to hon. Members' contributions, and it has been frankly shocking to learn that LFR has been in use since 2017 without any specific legislation in place to control its use and protect our civil liberties. That is seven years too many without legislation. Although I agree that the use of real-time facial recognition in the United Kingdom promises enhanced security and efficiency, it also raises significant legal and moral concerns, and there are severe adverse consequences for our society.

As a former software test manager, I am extremely concerned that private companies that profit from their technology are allowed to self-regulate and to confirm the efficacy of the products that they sell, and that the police are guided by those companies in how to use the tools and rely on the companies' reports of their efficacy to take legal action against innocent civilians.

The technology operates by capturing and analysing highly sensitive and personal biometric data. As has been mentioned, the legal framework for its use is complex and at times insufficient. The Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation provide some safeguards, requiring data processing to be fair, necessary and proportionate. However, the lack of specific legislation for facial recognition technology leaves huge room for misuse and overreach.

The deployment of this technology without explicit consent undermines several of our fundamental rights, some of which have been mentioned. The first is the right to privacy: constant surveillance and the collection of biometric data without explicit consent infringe an individual's privacy rights. This is particularly concerning when the technology is used in public spaces without people's knowledge. The second right is the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression. The use of facial recognition can deter individuals from participating in protests or public gatherings due to the fear of being monitored or identified. This undermines the fundamental right to assemble and express opinions freely.

The third right is the right to non-discrimination. As has been mentioned, facial recognition systems have been shown to have higher error rates for people of colour, women and younger individuals. This bias can lead to disproportionate targeting and wrongful arrests, exacerbating existing inequalities and discrimination. The final right is the right to data protection. The collection, storage and processing of biometric data must comply with data protection laws. Inadequate safeguards can lead to unauthorised access and misuse of personal data.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) cited examples of how this technology is used in Russia and China, and we know that it is used extensively in Israel as part of its apartheid regime and occupation of the Palestinian people. Violations highlight the need for strict regulation and oversight to ensure that the deployment of facial recognition technology does not infringe fundamental human rights. The technology subjects individuals to constant surveillance, often without their knowledge, eroding trust in public institutions. The ethical principle of autonomy is compromised when people are unaware that their biometric data is being collected and analysed.

Let me cite some examples of the technology's inefficacy and unreliability. In 2020, the Court of Appeal found that South Wales police's use of facial recognition

[*Iqbal Mohamed*]

technology was unlawful, and that the force had breached privacy rights and failed to adequately assess the risks to individual freedoms. The technology's accuracy is not infallible: misidentifications can lead to miscarriages of justice, where innocent individuals are wrongly accused or detained.

The disproportionate impact of FR technology on black people and people of colour is particularly concerning. Research has consistently shown that these systems are more likely to misidentify individuals from those groups. For example, a National Institute of Standards and Technology study—I do not know how old it is—found that FR algorithms were up to 100 times more likely to misidentify black and Asian faces than white faces. This disparity not only undermines the technology's reliability, but perpetuates systemic racism. In practice, this means that black people and people of colour are more likely to be subjected to unwanted surveillance and scrutiny, which can lead to a range of negative outcomes.

There are other examples of miscarriages of justice and misuse. In one instance, the Metropolitan police used FR technology at the Notting Hill carnival, leading to the wrongful identification and harassment of innocent individuals. These and the other examples cited by hon. Members underscore the potential for significant harm when this technology is deployed without adequate safeguards.

In conclusion, although facial recognition technology offers potential benefits, its deployment must be carefully regulated to prevent misuse and protect individual rights. The legal framework needs to be strengthened to ensure that the use of technology is transparent, accountable and subject to rigorous oversight. We must also address the inherent bias in these systems to prevent further entrenchment of racial inequalities. As we navigate the complexities of integrating new technologies into our society, let us prioritise the protection of our fundamental rights and ensure that advancements serve to enhance rather than undermine our collective wellbeing.

10.26 am

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for securing this important debate. It is difficult to follow the comprehensive presentation of the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed), but I would like to come at this debate from a different perspective—as a criminal barrister by profession. In trials that I have conducted, we have had difficulty with experts when identifying suspects charged in very serious cases. Two experts in relevant IT facial recognition software find it difficult to come to the same conclusion. One expert in a trial will say, “This is highly likely fitting of this particular defendant—confidence level maybe 50% or 60%.” Another expert in the same trial will counterargue and say, “Well, there are dissimilarities between the face and the image that we have been able to capture.” Ultimately, it is a matter for the jury as to whether they accept one expert's opinion over another. As a result, at present, we have counterarguments between experts over facial recognition technology.

What concerns me is the idea of allowing the state, in essence, to deploy this kind of technology in high streets, for example. The hon. Member for Brent East

(Dawn Butler) has already raised the issue of the disproportionate rate of stop and search—by multiple times; I think the rate was nine times higher for black males. What impact will facial recognition live transmission data have in the city of Birmingham? It is going to have an enormous impact. Members have raised the difficulties with the percentage error of recognitions, and the distrust that we have in Birmingham is a challenge already, particularly with young men and the police. What will this technology achieve? Will young men start wearing more face coverings in city centres? How will this technology be used, even if it is legislated for properly? For example, will the police have to notify the public, “We are using this facial recognition technology in the Bullring today between the hours of 10 am and 10 pm?” It does not seem to serve any real purpose.

We have a very effective police force in the west midlands, and it uses CCTV, which we have all over. If hon. Members go to any street in Birmingham, they will find tens or hundreds of houses with CCTV, and the police have used that to great effect; after a crime is committed, they track back and they prosecute. We have had so many successful prosecutions in very serious crimes, such as murder and violent crime, but the deployment of this technology will create enormous problems and divisions. As I said, there are already problems with how minority communities feel when they are stopped and searched. I think the right hon. Member for Maldon said that in the trial about 10 people were stopped, with one to two—as little as 10%—being identified. As the technology develops further, that percentage may increase, but at present I do not see how it will assist at all. Criminals know very well how to avoid detection, and face coverings will become the norm. Other than surveillance, this technology achieves very little. I do not see how it will assist in detection.

The hon. Member for Brent East drew some simple parallels. What would the public think about being stopped on a busy high street and asked to come to a police van to give their fingerprints and DNA? They would be outraged, and rightly so. It would almost legitimise police officers approaching people, in particular young men. We know that not just black people, but people of colour, women and children will be subject to the technology, and we know that there are errors. The right to privacy and the freedoms that we have are far greater than this technology, and I do not see how it will assist in deterrence, because people will simply use face coverings and all sorts of other things.

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** I see no other Back Benchers who wish to contribute, so I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

10.32 am

**Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Thank you, Dame Siobhain. I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for securing this debate. It is shocking that this might be the first proper debate we have had in this place on this topic.

We have discussed whether live facial recognition technology is a legitimate tool and, if so, under what circumstances and controls it should be used. It is clear from the debate that there are many doubts, and we should probably be thinking about halting the use of the technology until we have cleared them up.

I will start with the concern about discrimination, which was articulated well by the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler). It is clear that black people and people from other communities are likely to be disproportionately misidentified by this technology.

**James McMurdock:** I want us to be careful that we are not making assumptions that may not be right. I am not taking a firm position, but there have been a number of comments, from several parts of the Chamber, about racial disparity. It would be remiss of me to let those things be said without making the point that I am not 100% sure that they are all accurate. For example—

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** Order. I apologise, but could the hon. Member please explain briefly what his intervention is?

**James McMurdock:** Of course. The topic of racial disparity is one we should all treat extremely seriously—possibly one of the most serious things we can do to benefit our society is to discuss this and get it right—but can we please not make any leading assumptions? We live in a fair and good society. If someone listened to this debate in isolation, they might get an impression that I do not believe would be strictly fair.

**Bobby Dean:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but the evidence is quite clear in this area. Somebody might watch this debate and have doubts, but the research is quite clear.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Further to the point made by the hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock), just about every time that somebody has stated that there are issues of racial discrimination with this technology, they have cited sources that people can look at. For the benefit of both the public and the hon. Member, it is important to note that these are not just assumptions; they are based on data and evidence. There is further evidence we could give, such as my personal experience and the experiences of others, but those specific points were made with evidence.

**Bobby Dean:** I agree with the hon. Member that some evidence has been cited in the Chamber today, but there is other evidence that we can look at. Let us not forget that the technology exacerbates the known problem—particularly with the Met police in London, where I live—that black communities feel over-policed and underserved. That has built up over time, and the use of this technology could exacerbate that problem further.

The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) made a comment about how polite conversations do not always register as polite conversations. That is because of the persistence of those conversations over time. A repeated polite conversation starts to become an aggressive conversation to the person on the receiving end, if it is that persistent. There was also discussion about the findings of the national physical laboratory, but it is clear that those findings are disputed—*[Interruption.]* Well, it is clear that they are disputed; they have been disputed in the Chamber today. Until we get to the bottom of that, we need to think carefully about the controls that we have in relation to discrimination.

I want to talk about the general principle of privacy. As a liberal, I feel a general depression about how we have come to devalue privacy in society, and how we trade it away far too readily for other societal aims. We often hear the claim, “If you’re not doing anything wrong then there’s nothing to worry about,” as if the only value of privacy were to hide things that someone might be doing wrong. That is not the case. Privacy delivers so much more than that. It delivers personal wellbeing and gives people control over their own data. It allows us to have freedom of association and dignity. We need to think very carefully before we so readily trade away the principle of privacy in pursuit of other goals in society.

The opportunity for slippage has been discussed at length. One would think that such technology would come with strict controls, but it is clear that at the moment we have the opposite; in fact, Big Brother Watch has described it as a “legal vacuum”. The hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) talked about the creeping expansion of its use in London. I have seen that myself; what started off being limited to large-scale events, such as football matches, has turned into routine trials on high streets, such as mine in Sutton.

We have also seen expansion in the photos that are used. The technology started off using only photographs of people known to the police, for good reason, but it has been expanded to potentially including everyone who has a passport or driving licence photo. What started being strictly about warrant breakers and sex offenders could expand to be about pretty much anything the Government of the day want. If we think about the clampdown on protest under the previous Government, that potentially has a chilling impact on the right to freedom of association.

With all of those doubts, it is clear that we need proper parliamentary consideration of the issue. The Lib Dems ask the Minister to immediately halt the roll-out of live facial recognition technology until we get it right. It should be down to this place to determine the correct controls and whether there is a legitimate use of the technology at all, given all the concerns about discrimination and privacy. Privacy is a fundamental civil liberty. We have undervalued it far too much in recent times. This is an opportunity to protect it, and we should take it.

10.39 am

**Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) on securing the debate and on the characteristically thoughtful manner in which he approached his speech.

I think this is the first time that I have appeared opposite the new Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention—the job that I was doing until a few months ago—so let me congratulate her on her appointment. Although I will of course hold the Government to account, I will do everything I can to constructively support her in making a great success of the job, and I really do wish her well in the role.

I want to start by reminding colleagues of the way that live facial recognition works. It is different from retrospective facial recognition, which we have not debated today and, in the interests of time, I do not propose to



[Chris Philp]

go into. As some Members have already said, live facial recognition starts with a watchlist of people who are wanted by the police. It is not the case that anyone can get on that watchlist, which generally comprises people who are wanted for criminal offences—often very serious offences—people who have failed to attend court, and people who are registered sex offenders, where the police want to check that they are complying with their conditions. As people walk down a high street, they are scanned, typically by a CCTV camera on a mobile van, and then compared to the watchlist. The vast majority of people are not on the watchlist, as we would expect, and their image is immediately and automatically deleted. Where a person is on the watchlist, the police will stop them and ask if they have any form of identification.

To be very clear, no one gets convicted on the basis of that facial recognition match, so it is not overturning the presumption of innocence, and if it turns out that the person stopped is not the person on the watchlist, obviously they can continue on their way. However, if they are the person on the watchlist, a normal criminal investigation will follow, with the normal standards of evidence.

**Iqbal Mohamed:** On the point about the automatic deletion of data, there are many examples, but the one I can remember is Google incognito browsing mode. That was meant to be very private—only you saw where you went—but Google was found to be storing that data, and it has been legally challenged and prosecuted for breaching the GDPR or other privacy laws. Companies may say that things are immediately deleted, but it is not always true.

**Chris Philp:** That is a good point; we must ensure that the operating procedures are adhered to, and I will come on to that a little later. However, to be absolutely clear, if someone is identified as a match, a normal criminal investigation is conducted to normal criminal standards. Nobody is convicted on the basis of this evidence alone—or, indeed, on the basis of this evidence at all.

Let me come to the question about racial disparity. When this technology was first introduced, about seven years ago, there were reports—accurate reports—that there was racial bias in the way that the algorithm operated. The algorithm has been developed a great deal since those days, and it has been tested definitively by the national physical laboratory, the nation's premier testing laboratory. NPL testing is the gold standard of testing and this technology has been tested relatively recently. For the benefit of Members, I will read out what the results of that testing were:

“The NPL study found that, when used at the settings maintained by the Met”—

that is the 0.6 setting that the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) referred to earlier—

“there was no statistically significant difference in the facial recognition technology's accuracy across”

different demographic groups. In other words, the technology as it is being used today—not five years ago, when there were issues—has been certified by the NPL and it has been found that there is not any racial bias at the settings used.

**Dawn Butler:** But when we look at the numbers of people, something like 0.5% of scans—I cannot remember the statistic—still result in somebody being misidentified.

**Chris Philp:** On the misidentification rate, I think the Bridges court case set a standard of a false positive rate of one in 1,000: out of every 1,000 people stopped, 999 are the people the police think they are, while one is misidentified. The Minister may have more up-to-date figures, but from my recollection the system in practice is running at about one in 6,000. That is an extraordinarily high accuracy rate—much more accurate than a regular stop and search.

About 25% to 30% of regular physical stops and searches, where a police officer stops someone and searches them for drugs or a knife or something, are successful. About 70% are unsuccessful, while the equivalent figure for live facial recognition is 0.02%. That means that this technology is 4,500 times less likely to result in someone being inappropriately stopped than a regular stop and search. It therefore hugely—by three orders of magnitude—reduces the likelihood of someone being improperly stopped and searched.

I turn to the use of the technology on the ground. I asked for it to be trialled in the centre of Croydon, which is the borough I represent in Parliament. Over the past nine months or so, it has been deployed on a relatively regular basis: about once a week. I believe that the Minister was supposed to go down this morning to have a look; I certainly encourage her to go again as soon as she can. By the way, the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) asked whether people know when the technology is being used. The answer is yes: one of the guidelines is that public signage must be displayed telling the public that the technology is in use.

Over that period in Croydon, there have been approximately 200 arrests of people who would not otherwise have been arrested, including for all kinds of offences such as class A drugs supply, grievous bodily harm, fraud and domestic burglary. It has also included a man who had been wanted for two rapes dating back to 2017. That wanted rapist would be free to this day if not for this technology. Just a couple of weeks ago, a man was stopped and subsequently arrested in relation to a rape allegation from June this year. There are people who are alleged to have committed rape who would not have been stopped—who would still be walking free—if not for this technology. It is only the fact that they walked past a camera outside East Croydon station or somewhere that has meant they were stopped by the police. They will now have a normal trial with the normal standards of evidence, but they would not have been caught in the first place if not for this technology.

I have done quite a lot of public meetings on this. I explain, “These are the people who get caught, and the price the public pay is that you might get scanned when you walk down Croydon High Street, but if you are innocent your picture is immediately deleted.” By and large, the overwhelming majority of the people in Croydon think that a reasonable trade-off.

There should be protections, of course. Several hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, have rightly said that there should be guidelines, rules and procedures. However, it is not true that there is a complete vacuum as far as rules and

regulations are concerned. The Bridges case at the Court of Appeal in 2020 looked at how South Wales police were using the technology between 2017 and 2020. It found that some of the ways they were using the technology were not appropriate because they broke rules on things like data protection privacy. It set out in case law the guidelines that have to be adhered to for the technology to be lawful—things like public signage, the rate of accuracy and having no racial bias.

Secondly—I do hope I am not taking the Minister's entire speech—there are guidelines for police. The College of Policing has national authorised professional practice guidelines that the police are supposed to stick to. There is a debate to be had about whether, for the sake of clarity and democratic accountability, we in Parliament should set something out more formal; my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon made that point. I think there would be some merit in clarifying at a national level where the guidelines sit, but I would not go as far as Europe. If we had done so, those rapists would not have been arrested. I would also be careful to ensure that any legislation is flexible enough to accommodate changing technology. Primary legislation may not be the right vehicle: a regulation-making power might be a more sensible approach, so that things can be kept up to date from time to time.

While we consider that, I strongly urge the Minister not to halt the use of the technology. As we speak, it is arresting criminals in Croydon and elsewhere who would not otherwise be caught. I urge her to continue supporting the police to roll it out. I think some money was allocated in the Budget for the current financial year, to continue developing the technology. I would welcome an update from the Minister on whether that money is still being spent in the current financial year. I do hope it has not somehow been snaffled by the Treasury in a misguided cost-saving effort—

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** Order. I apologise for interrupting the shadow Secretary of State, but I am looking at the time. I am sure hon. Members would like to hear from the Minister.

**Chris Philp:** None more so than me. I will conclude by saying that this is an important technology: it takes people off the streets who would otherwise not be caught. The Minister has my support in continuing its roll-out and deployment.

10.49 am

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) on securing this important debate. I am grateful to him and all other right hon. and hon. Members who have made thoughtful and insightful contributions this morning.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) on his new role. When he held the role that I now hold, he was very passionate about this subject. That passion is demonstrated today by the number of interventions he has made and by his contribution in defence of the previous Government's approach to this particular policy. Now that we have seen the shadow Home Secretary in a Westminster Hall debate on this issue, I very much hope that we might see

him here again when we debate the many other policing issues that we have to deal with, including police reform and police accountability—the list goes on.

This has been a very good debate. We have ranged from discussing the Jason Bourne films to a night out with my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler). We have also had excellent contributions from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), the hon. Members for Leicester South (Shokat Adam), for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry), for South Basildon and East Thurrock (James McMurdock), for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) and for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan), and the Liberal Democrat Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean).

I will deal with the complex issues that Members have set out so eloquently. At the heart of the issue is the fact that we are dealing with a powerful technology that has the potential to be transformational for policing. However, some have very legitimate concerns about it, including misidentification, misuse and the effect on human rights and individual privacy. I agree wholeheartedly that we need a proper, informed debate on the subject, both in this House and with the public, and I am pleased that we have had the opportunity to start that today.

Let me quickly run through the current use and benefits of live facial recognition, which, as we have discussed, allows the police to spot people in crowds. It uses live video footage of crowds passing a camera and compares their images to a specific watchlist of people wanted by the police. As well as Essex police, who we have heard about, the Metropolitan police and South Wales police have been using this technology for a number of years. In fact, as the shadow Home Secretary said, I was due to go and see one of the deployments this morning, but then this debate was scheduled, so I am going to see it for myself this afternoon instead.

I am told by the Metropolitan police that between January and November this year they made over 460 arrests as a result of live facial recognition deployments, including for offences such as rape, domestic abuse, knife crime and violent robbery. In addition, over 45 registered sex offenders have been arrested for breaching their conditions. South Wales police tell me that between January and November, they deployed live facial recognition locally on 20 occasions, resulting in 12 arrests. They also located a high-risk missing young girl, who they were able to safeguard from child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation. Essex police, as the right hon. Member for Maldon has attested, have also had considerable success in their use of this technology.

The potential of live facial recognition to contribute to our safer streets mission is clear. It could make our streets safer for us all, particularly for women and girls, by helping the police to identify wanted people quickly and accurately. It could also save precious police time. Rapid advances in the technology and improvements in the accuracy of algorithms increase that potential.

Let me consider the concerns that have been raised. I was pleased to hear that the right hon. Member for Maldon was impressed by the strict limit that Essex police have put on their use of live facial recognition. That includes use of the narrowly drawn watchlist and the immediate deletion of images. However, I note his worries about the lack of a specific legal framework for

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

the technology's use. It is therefore important to be clear that facial recognition is covered by data protection, equality and human rights law as well as common law powers and detailed guidance from the College of Policing. However, the right hon. Member is right that no one specific law gives the police the power to use live facial recognition.

The Ada Lovelace Institute, an independent research institution with a mission to ensure that data and AI work for people and society, has written to the Home Secretary to express similar concerns to those of the right hon. Member. It believes that the only way to scale up those technologies safely and successfully is through the introduction of a statutory regulatory framework. I have spoken to senior police leaders about the matter, and some believe that the lack of a specific legal framework inhibits their use of the technology and dampens willingness to innovate.

With legal challenges highly likely, it is not surprising that some police forces are reluctant to use the technology. However, others in policing are keen to emphasise the safeguards that are already in place. For example, they assure me that the police do not keep the biometric data of people filmed during live facial recognition deployments, that watchlists are bespoke and that the police deploy the technology only when there is an intelligence case for doing that. I have also been assured that there will always be a human being in the loop to decide whether to apprehend someone. That would never be done solely on the basis of a match made by a computer.

Privacy campaign groups have a long-standing interest in the subject. I am aware of their concerns, as well as previous and ongoing legal actions relating to police use of live facial recognition technology. Potential bias in the algorithms used for live facial recognition systems is another frequently raised concern. Questions have been asked today about that very point and whether live facial recognition discriminates against people on the grounds of gender or race. I am also aware that 65 Members

of Parliament and peers signed an open letter last year that called for a ban on live facial recognition, and that in January the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee sent the then Home Secretary a report raising concerns and making recommendations about live facial recognition.

I remind Members that the Government have been in post for five months. Let us put that in the context of the previous 14 years of Conservative Administrations. The Government want to take time to listen and to think carefully about the concerns that have been raised and about how we can best enable the police to use live facial recognition in a way that secures and maintains public confidence.

As we have heard today, facial recognition technology is a powerful tool. In considering its current and future use, we must balance privacy concerns with the expectation that we place on the police to keep our streets safe. We particularly need to consider how much support the police may require from Government and Parliament to set and manage the rules for using technologies such as facial recognition. We must think about how we protect the public from potential misuse of those technologies, and we need to consider how the application of the rules and regulations is scrutinised.

I am therefore committed to a programme of engagement in the coming months to inform that thinking. Building on initial conversations with police, I will hold a series of roundtables, for example, with regulators and civil society groups before the end of the year. I look forward to hearing at first hand from a broad range of parties on the subject.

I am running out of time. I want to say much more on this issue, and I want to confirm that money is being spent this year on the roll-out of the live facial recognition vans that are being equipped to carry out this work. There is a full evaluation of that work going on. I very much look forward to the House having further opportunities to debate the issue in the coming weeks and months.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*



## Rural Broadband

11 am

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** I remind hon. Members that they can make speeches in this debate only with the agreement of the debate holder. Sarah Dyke will move the motion and then the Minister will respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

**Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered broadband in rural areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. Broadband and internet connectivity are integral to modern life, whether that be in education, employment, leisure, healthcare or almost anything else. We rely on broadband more than ever before, and the tasks that we carry out require higher speeds than ever before. Digital connectivity provides us with great opportunities. Small businesses can widen their reach. Health consultations can be carried out online. However, many rural areas are still struggling to realise the opportunities available, because of poor broadband coverage: 17% of rural domestic premises and 30% of rural commercial premises do not have access to superfast broadband.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. She brings really important debates to Westminster Hall, and her contributions on the Floor of the House are much appreciated as well. On the subject of rural broadband, especially for businesses, I, like the hon. Lady, make a plea. Broadband must be dependable as well as fast, and the Government need to ensure that connections are up to date, fit for purpose and able to cope with the intensification that working from home has brought to the need for reliable connection. Does she agree that the Government really need to move on this one?

**Sarah Dyke:** Yes, I agree, and I will come on to that as I move through my speech.

County Councils Network analysis shows that only 21% of county areas have gigabit broadband, compared with 70% of London. Those statistics will not come as a surprise to my constituents in Butleigh, where more than 15% of premises receive lines getting 10 megabits per second or less, putting the area in the worst 10% in the UK. Other areas of my constituency mirror that: 10% of premises in Bruton, Brewham and Cucklington receive less than 10 megabits per second, while about 7% of premises in Curry Rivel, Fivehead, Ilchester, Mudford, Langport, Long Sutton and Martock also receive less than 10 megabits per second. Only yesterday my constituency office in Sparkford lost internet connection during the working day, leaving my team frustrated and annoyed. The same feelings are regularly felt by many people reliant on good broadband to carry out their work in rural areas. The broadband speeds that these premises receive are under the universal service obligation, which Ofcom calculated at 10 megabits per second in 2018. However, it is important to note that as the need increases, broadband speeds must reflect that.

In a survey by the Countryside Alliance, 70% of respondents felt that digital infrastructure was the most important issue to the rural economy. Given that only 58% of premises in Glastonbury and Somerton currently have gigabit broadband compared with the national average of 78%, it is clear that people in rural areas are being held back by poor broadband access.

**Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD):** The Minister has very kindly agreed to meet me and my Somerset colleagues, including the instigator of this debate. The reducing rate of network expansion across Somerset is absolutely shocking. Connecting Devon and Somerset has been a monumental failure. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to make certain that the exceedingly disappointing performance in getting rural broadband into Somerset has to stop, and things need to accelerate, not decelerate?

**Sarah Dyke:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing an audience with the Minister. I hope we can ensure that we get the coverage we need in Somerset, which is largely a rural county.

**John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab):** I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. Connectivity is a significant problem for my constituents. My constituency of Derbyshire Dales has the 26th lowest rate of gigabit broadband coverage in the country, and currently only 40% of residents have access to gigabit broadband. Does the hon. Member therefore welcome the fact that the recent Budget allocated £500 million to support the roll-out of gigabit broadband to ensure that we can reach full national coverage by 2030?

**Sarah Dyke:** The funding is very welcome, but we need to make sure that it is fit for purpose and reaches our customers. That is the most important thing. Far too many rural areas are in very hard-to-reach areas, so the money should be fit for purpose.

Openreach's gigabit economy report estimates that full-fibre coverage could boost UK productivity by £72 billion by 2030 and bring over half a million people back into the workforce. If the Government want to achieve the growth that they have spoken about, they must recognise that there are huge opportunities in rural areas, and adequate broadband coverage is crucial to achieving that.

**Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD):** I also represent a very rural area. Despite the fact that it is a stone's throw away from Bristol, there are people who do not have adequate services. Does my hon. Friend agree that the timeliness of getting the service is also important? If professionals such as doctors wait a long time for the installation, that is as much of an issue as the speeds once the service is installed.

**Sarah Dyke:** I could not agree more. The ongoing spending review must take that into account and must ensure that the remaining unspent funds for Project Gigabit are spent on ensuring that hard-to-reach areas are indeed covered.

I thank the Chamber Engagement Team who provided me with quotes from members of the public in preparation for this debate. The following demonstrates just how damaging poor broadband is to productivity in people's lives. Alison, a small business owner, said that slow

[Sarah Dyke]

broadband impacts the entire productivity of the business, from accessing emails to downloading and uploading files to suppliers. With more and more people working from home, poor broadband puts rural people at a massive disadvantage.

My constituents in Charlton Adam work in technology and video editing, often from home; but due to poor broadband speeds, they are continually hampered by poor download and transfer speeds. When inquiring about the cost of connecting fibre to their premises for on-demand services, they were quoted an astonishing price of £270,000.

Poor broadband also impacts farming and agricultural businesses.

**Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD):** This issue has a real impact on rural farming businesses. As a vet I spend a lot of time driving around the Meon valley and places such as Chilcomb, where not only is the broadband terrible, but a mobile signal and 3G, 4G and 5G barely exist. It is not unusual for me to be trying to find a property at midnight to attend an emergency—which can affect someone's business if it results in the death of a cow or horse—and be unable even to make a phone call or look on Google Maps to find my location. We lack not just broadband, but connectivity on every level. If we can get a landline to every single property in the UK, we should be able to do the same for fibre.

**Sarah Dyke:** I wholeheartedly agree, and will say more about the implications for rural businesses, farmers and vets.

Farmers rely on the internet for multiple purposes, such as sustainable farming incentive and other grant applications, animal monitoring and the security of their property. Vanessa, a farmer, told the engagement team that she could not connect her burglar alarm to her mobile as her broadband was too weak. That is very concerning for farms, especially in the south-west, where the cost of rural crime rose 41% last year, costing farmers £7 million, according to the National Farmers Union's "Rural Crime Report". Even if equipment is fitted with alarms, it takes the police time to respond due to the remote locations of farms and rural businesses, but reliable broadband and smart wi-fi products give farms proactive and reactive security.

**Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con):** Does the hon. Lady agree that the Minister needs to find a suitable alternative for our constituents in Somerset, after the failure of Connecting Devon and Somerset and Airband?

**Sarah Dyke:** As I said, we must work harder to resolve some of the problems that CDS has left us in Devon and Somerset.

Farms are also hindered by poor mobile connectivity. An NFU survey revealed that only 21% of farmers had reliable mobile signal across their whole farm. That is especially important in farming, as it is Britain's most dangerous industry and accounts for 20% of all deaths in the workplace. Farmers often work alone, so it is vital that they can contact help if there is an incident.

We must make progress on the shared rural network. Although the recent funding announcements are welcome there is still more progress to be made, especially in the

very hard-to-connect areas that make up about 4% of Glastonbury and Somerton. I have spoken to Connecting Devon and Somerset, and the challenges to connecting those premises are clear. If there is physical infrastructure access, a build can cost £20 per metre, but without it prices can go up 10 times. If the landowner does not give permission, the costs rise even further. Project Gigabit has been targeting homes and businesses not included in broadband suppliers' plans, and has helped to reach those hard-to-reach communities. It is important that we recognise the project's successes, which I hope will continue, but we must not forget the final few per cent of people who will struggle to get good broadband coverage.

**Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green):** I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate. Several villages in my constituency depend on outdated legacy copper lines. Areas such as Darrow Green Road in Denton and Ringsfield common rely on copper connections that can be a couple of miles from the cabinet. They struggle with broadband speeds that are abysmally inadequate for the needs of modern life. Those areas have no indication of when they will get upgrades. Will the hon. Lady join me in calling on the Minister to set out transparent timescales for supporting those villages and hamlets?

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** Order. This is Sarah Dyke's debate, and she can conduct it as she wishes, but it seems to me that it may be more appropriate to ask for a longer debate because of the number of interventions she is accepting and the difficulty that may cause the Minister in responding.

**Sarah Dyke:** I take your point, Dame Siobhain, so I will hesitate to take any more interventions.

The previous Government launched a consultation on reaching very hard-to-reach areas, and to their credit began important work in this sector. The new Government must take the opportunity to re-establish that work to ensure that those areas are not left further behind. This is a once-in-a-generation project, and I fear that, if we do not focus on providing adequate coverage now, it may never happen, as it is highly likely that these areas will not be commercially viable for providers to connect in the future. When speaking to Wessex Internet, which has both the local authority and the Project Gigabit contracts for Glastonbury and Somerton, it is clear that there are changes that could help it to provide coverage in hard-to-reach areas. More flexibility is required from Building Digital UK to add additional properties to the contract and to ensure that premises that have been missed are brought into scope again, while also providing a route to subsidy funding that would help to boost coverage.

Many providers face struggles in accessing land, with the electronic communications code sometimes necessitating taking a lot of time to grant the provider access to private land to build, thus creating a barrier to rural network build. The electronic communications code could be streamlined to speed up that process, reduce costs and provide more communities with access to gigabit broadband faster.

That would be welcomed by my constituents in Fivehead who wrote to me before this debate to reveal that they were reliant on the slow speed of 5 megabits per second,

which is hardly adequate to meet modern demands. Fibre build to the premises may never be feasible for some rural areas due to the huge cost and logistical challenges involved. We must therefore look at alternative solutions, whether that be fixed wireless or, in the most rural areas, satellite coverage. As technology develops, opportunities arise, and we must be prepared to take full advantage of that. The Liberal Democrats are committed to ensuring that gigabit broadband is available to every home and business, and we support local bespoke solutions to achieve that.

I look forward to the Minister's comments, which will be short, on how this Government will ensure that these most-difficult-to-reach places are not forgotten. Now is the opportunity for us to move further and faster and to simplify processes to deliver gigabit broadband to every community. We must not leave rural areas behind. Otherwise, I fear they will never catch up.

11.16 am

**The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant):** It is a delight to be here, Dame Siobhain, and I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) on securing this debate. I am not sure I will be able to answer the questions of all the Members who have come to this debate in my speech.

Some Members have raised concerns at DSIT questions as well, and I note that one Member said that I was prepared to have an audience with people, which makes me sound like the Pope. I am not the pontifex maximus—I am not even the pontifex minimus—but my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson), who is my Parliamentary Private Secretary, and I are happy to organise meetings with officials to go through the specific issues in individual constituencies. Some of the statistics that have been thrown out are different from the statistics I have, and it may be that mine are a little more up to date, because we have a whole Department to look up statistics for us. That offer is available to all hon. Members. I want to be as helpful a Minister as possible, because—

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD) *rose*—

**Sir Ashley Fox** *rose*—

**Chris Bryant:** Wait a second! Because I fully accept the fundamental point that was made right at the beginning by the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton: broadband is essential to nearly every form of engagement in modern life—finding out where you are, finding out which is the nearest chemist that is still open, logging on to a Government website, the Government trying to do their business, or someone trying to set up a local business. All those things are absolutely vital.

Broadband is greedy. Every year, more and more speed and capacity is needed. That is why we need to make sure that we get to full gigabit capable broadband for every single set of premises as soon as we possibly can. That is not a difficult thing to achieve.

**Tessa Munt** *rose*—

**Chris Bryant:** I will give way to the hon. Lady because her request to intervene is timely.

**Tessa Munt:** I thank the Minister greatly. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers)—is the Minister actually the king of mobile signal as well? If he is, there is a cracking need to get on with making sure that areas like mine, like his, have got a decent mobile signal.

**Chris Bryant:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I am the Minister for Telecoms, and that includes—

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair):** Does that include Portcullis House?

**Chris Bryant:** That is an interesting intervention from the Chair! I think that Portcullis House is a matter for the Speaker and the Administration Committee. But there is a serious point here: in many cases if we could get to 5G standalone universally, some of these issues would not apply, because we would be able to do lots of things. The police, for instance, could have fully streamed services available through their 5G, and broadband might not be so immediately significant.

I am painfully aware that this is an issue I raised as a Back-Bench MP and baby MP all the time. Sometimes Ofcom's reporting does not match people's lived experience. It will say, for instance, that somewhere has 98% coverage from all four operators on mobile, but when people get there they cannot get a signal for love nor money. Often that is because of the way Ofcom has been reporting, which relies on 2 megabits per second. But with 2 megabits per second people cannot do anything. That goes back to the original point made by the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton—I will think of her as the hon. Member for Glastonbury Tor now, because it is shorter in my head.

**Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The data issue that the Minister is raising is precisely what we have been experiencing. Looking at it on paper, from the maps, the villages have fantastic signal and broadband, but that is just not people's experience. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me recently to discuss this and for the roll-out we are going to see from the Government in East Cleveland.

**Chris Bryant:** I do not want Opposition Members to think that I have had an audience with a Labour Member and not with others. There is a universal service obligation on the Minister here. For most of the issues that have been raised, I think the most useful thing would be to book in a time for officials from Building Digital UK to go through both the mobile and broadband issues that relate to Members' specific constituencies. We do have more precise maps, and we are able to talk all those issues through.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) is right. One of the first things I did when I became the Minister with responsibility for telecoms was to write to Ofcom to say, "You have to review the way that you look at these issues of reporting." I am glad to say that Ofcom replied recently, and I am happy to put a copy of that letter in the Library so that everybody can see the correspondence we have had. But it is a good point; apart from anything else, mobile operators would quite like to know where there is good coverage—and good



[Chris Bryant]

coverage should mean coverage that is actually any use to anybody, rather than something that theoretically says 4G but does not feel like 4G at all.

**Richard Foord:** The Minister has kindly agreed to meet me and some Somerset colleagues later this month to discuss this issue. One thing I want to put on the agenda for that meeting is Connecting Devon and Somerset, which has cancelled three contracts previously and has just cancelled a fourth. I wonder if we have a special problem in Devon and Somerset.

**Chris Bryant:** That may be the case, and that is one of the specific things we can take up with BDUK.

I should explain the whole process first. Of course the Government do not want to have to pay for the roll-out of broadband across the whole of the UK. That would be an enormous big-ticket item. Nor, for that matter, do we want to pay for the roll-out of 5G. We are therefore trying to ensure that where commercial operators can do that roll-out, they are able to do so as cost-effectively as possible. Where it is not commercially viable, the Government will step in. That is what the whole BDUK programme is, both through Project Gigabit, which relates to broadband, and the shared rural network, which applies to mobile telephony. That is the plan.

The hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton mentioned very hard-to-reach places. The truth is that there will probably be 1% of places where it will be extremely difficult—for either a commercial operation or for the taxpayer—to take a fibre to every single property. That could be so prohibitively expensive for the taxpayer that we will have to look at alternative means. That goes to the point made by the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) that we will have to look at alternatives, and some of those may relate to satellite or wireless delivery of broadband.

**Mr Angus MacDonald** (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

**Chris Bryant:** Another new Member wants to make a contribution.

**Mr Angus MacDonald:** The £500 million set aside for the shared rural network was instigated by the previous Government. In the highlands of Scotland, it is organised by land mass, rather than the geographic concentration of people. If the Minister wants to find £300 million or £400 million of that to help with the roll-out of broadband, he can feel free, because it is very unpopular where we are and it is not serving the needs of the people.

**Chris Bryant:** I hope that I might be able to help the hon. Gentleman a little here. I know the highlands of Scotland very well: I spent many of my childhood summers in Aviemore, and I know the Cairngorms well. It seems to me illogical simply to put big masts in places of extreme natural beauty just for the sake of saying that we have covered geographical mass. It is much more important to have masts in places where there are actually people and a connection that will be used, so that is very much the direction of travel that I hope we can go in. I am not sure that it will save the amount of money that he talks about, because, for all the reasons raised by other hon. Members, people still need connectivity

in lots of places that are fairly out of the way, but broadly speaking he makes a fair point. I cannot remember if he has written to me about this issue, but I know that several Scottish MPs have. If he writes to me, he will get the same response as the others, which broadly speaking is the point that I have just made. Incidentally, if Members want, they can go to [thinkbroadband.com](http://thinkbroadband.com) for the most up-to-date figures on broadband roll-out.

I mentioned the figures raised by the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton. I think the figures in the south-west are that 97% of premises can now access superfast broadband and 77% can access gigabit-capable broadband. However, that is lower than in the rest of the UK, and our aspiration is to get to the same levels across the whole of the United Kingdom, although there are obviously geographical difficulties; I know that from the south Wales valleys, where this issue is also difficult. There is a difference between “have access to” and “have”. For instance, in many parts of the UK—not rural, but urban—gigabit-capable broadband has gone down the street, but not into the building, so there are sets of issues for urban areas. I know that the hon. Lady and others have written to me or asked me questions about how much of the BDUK budget is being spent on rural areas. It is more than 90%, but we need to address some urban issues as well. I am trying not to see this as urban versus rural, as there are different issues in different areas, and we need to address all of them. I have referred to areas that are very hard to reach, and we are looking at alternatives.

The hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton also raised the issue of the electronic communications code, and I rather agree with her that the process is cumbersome. There has obviously been a new electronic communications code, and I can confirm that we are looking at implementing the provisions under the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act 2022 that have not yet been implemented in fairly short order. I hope that we can make further announcements about that fairly soon, and that should deal with some of the issues that the hon. Lady is concerned about. The truth of the matter is that broadband, mobile connectivity and connectivity in general are as important as water, electricity and any of the other services on which we have all come to rely, whether it is for the issues that the hon. Lady relates in particular about farms, to do with running the Government or to do with being a member of society.

One of the other areas in which we must do far more—it is a shame that less has been done over the last 12 years by the Government—is digital inclusion. We can map areas of digital deprivation in parts of the country, including in the south-west, and we need to tackle that. We need to have a whole-Government approach, part of which is about access, part of which is about skills and part of which is about tackling poverty. There is a whole series of different issues, but if we really want to take the whole country forward into a digital and prosperous future, we can do so only if we have included every single part of it. As I said, part of that is about connectivity and the affordability of connectivity. Part of it is about people understanding that they need the high speeds talked about by the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton, and part of it is about having the skills and understanding to take those issues on.

I am very happy to give an audience to anyone who wants one; they should approach me as soon as possible, because we have quite a long list of people who do. However, I see this issue as an essential part of our delivering an economic future that we can all be proud of in this country.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

11.30 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Educational Opportunities

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of tackling barriers to educational opportunities.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard.

In the UK today, most 18-year-olds—around 64%—do not go to university. I want to focus on the barriers facing the 64% of young people in accessing the education and training that they need to lead fulfilling working lives. I do not believe that they have benefited from the same educational opportunities as the minority of young people who leave school for university, and that makes no moral, social or economic sense. In my view, our system of vocational education and training is not working for the 64%, or for our country.

My constituency of Folkestone and Hythe has incredible potential for a thriving vocational education and training system. It has strengths in the creative industries, independent retail, tourism and hospitality, as well as green energy and nuclear decommissioning. We are home to the Little Cheyne Court wind farm and the former Dungeness nuclear power station. However, the potential for a technical education system to supply those industries, and others, with skilled workers in both Folkestone and Hythe and the UK as a whole remains untapped. In 2022-23, there were 677 apprenticeship starts in Folkestone and Hythe, but only five in the leisure, tourism and travel sector, despite the size of that sector. And despite the significant number of regeneration projects in Folkestone and Hythe, the number of apprenticeship starts in construction, planning and the built environment fell by 49% in 2022-23 compared with the previous year.

Our country has some incredible further education colleges; I commend the work of East Kent college in Folkestone. When I visited during the general election campaign, I was shown workshops, kitchens and classrooms where, among many other vocations, the builders, electricians, carpenters, programmers, chefs and healthcare workers of the future are being educated. The college, which was judged to be “outstanding” by Ofsted in 2023, offers an incredible range of qualifications, including BTecs and T-levels. It offers adult education and there is also a junior college, with a two-year creative curriculum for learners aged 14 and over who want to specialise in arts or business studies. I thank its staff and students for their hard work, and for the grilling that they gave me and the other candidates at a hustings event hosted by the college before the election.

Unfortunately, in many colleges like East Kent college, not all students who complete courses in specialist areas actually go on to work in those fields. That is not always down to students changing their minds; it is also because of the lack of jobs and apprenticeships available in the labour market. Under 14 years of Conservative Governments, apprenticeships starts plummeted, the apprenticeship levy was exposed as inadequate and further education was starved of vital funds. In 2015-16, the total number of apprenticeship starts was 509,000; by 2022-23, that number had fallen to 337,000. Between 2017 and 2024, the number of engineering apprenticeship

[Tony Vaughan]

starts fell by 42%. It was encouraging to see that apprenticeship starts grew by 3% in the month Labour took office, demonstrating employers' optimism following the change of Government.

I am afraid to say that the Conservatives' reforms, such as the apprenticeship levy and T-levels, were ineffective. There was not enough flexibility built into the apprenticeship levy and not enough investment in apprenticeships for younger learners. As the chief executive officer of Make UK, Stephen Phipson, has said, successive Governments have provided inadequate funding for engineering apprenticeships, rendering them uneconomical for FE colleges and private providers to deliver. Neither have we had proper alignment between our industrial and our vocational education strategies.

As a result, our skills policy has not been supporting the sectors of our economy we most need to grow. Sectors such as battery technology, electrical vehicle production and renewable technology manufacturing do not receive the funding for apprenticeships that they need, and in turn do not benefit from a steady supply of skilled workers. We need to end the mismatch between what is taught and the skills needed by the labour market. I warmly welcome the Government's agenda for skills and vocational education and the Budget announcement of an additional £300 million funding boost for further education next year. But we know that in this policy area, as in so many others, funding is not enough—ambitious reform is what we need.

I will touch on three aspects of the Government skills policy: Skills England, devolution and reform of the apprenticeship levy. I support the creation of Skills England, which will end the fractured skills landscape and bring together combined authorities, businesses, workers, trade unions and colleges so that there is co-ordination to meet local economies' skills needs. It is incredibly important that Skills England will be a strategic body so that it can make sure that our industrial strategy, Invest 2035, and the vocational educational strategy work as one. Only then will sectors such as advanced manufacturing, which is rightly a focus of our Invest 2035 plan, benefit from a predictable supply of skilled labour.

I also support the fact that part of Skills England's mandate will be to collaborate with the Migration Advisory Committee so that we ensure that our own young talent is trained up and joins our labour market before we reach out to recruit from abroad. We have an abundance of young talent. This is about ensuring that our skills policy makes the most of the talent, work ethic and creativity of our young people while having an immigration system that welcomes the workers we need to get our economy growing and our public services working again. The Migration Advisory Committee has for far too long looked at labour market shortages in a vacuum without thinking about how our skills policy can address those shortages in the long term.

I also believe that it is important for more powers over skills and technical education to be devolved, because the UK still has variation in our regional economies. For example, the creative industries are very important in Folkestone and Hythe, and nationally that sector contributed £124 billion to the UK economy in '22. In the west midlands, the automotive sector is important. On Teesside, there is a resilient chemical sector, and

there is still a proud steel industry in Scunthorpe and Port Talbot. Different regional economies will demand different focuses and priorities for policymakers, so I endorse the Government's plan to ensure that there are local skills improvement plans and that adult skills funding will be devolved to combined authorities.

Reform of the apprenticeship levy is long overdue. The levy is a tax on employers with a wage bill of over £3 million a year that funds apprenticeships. The problem is that the funds levied can be spent only on very specific types of training. For example, businesses cannot use the money to fund any courses shorter than one year. The new growth and skills levy will be critical, because it will mean that businesses will be able to pay for a greater range of training options, apprentices will have more choice and apprenticeships can be shorter than a year. It is very important that employers will be required to fund more of their level 7—that is, master's degree-level—apprenticeships. The money saved there will be reinvested into foundation apprenticeships, which will give younger workers more opportunity and flexibility.

I know that the road ahead is challenging. Between 2017 and 2022, the number of skills shortages in the UK doubled to more than half a million, and by 2022 skills shortages accounted for 36% of job vacancies. Training expenditure is also at its lowest level since records began in 2011. Yet if we get skills policy right, the opportunities are huge. Total revenue from the apprenticeship levy is forecast to grow from £3.9 billion to £4.6 billion by 2029 due to rising wages. A broader skills base will mean more productive jobs, higher labour productivity, stronger wage growth and rising living standards for all workers, not just university-educated professionals. That will benefit young people, many of whom feel demotivated and disenfranchised and believe that the 21st century economy does not serve them. In places where they have been given a pound shop instead of a workshop, they may be right.

On future policy development, can the Minister provide more detail on the timeline for when we can expect the different phases of development of Skills England? I would also be grateful to know how the Government plan to align Invest 2035 with their post-16 education strategy. Both those strategies require prioritisation, so what sectors do the Government plan to focus on to drive up the number of apprenticeship starts? Are there any other areas of education and skills policy that the Government would like to devolve to local economies rather than combined authorities? For example, there is no combined authority in Kent. What plans do the Government have to ensure more apprenticeship starts in the industries of the future, such as artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles, green energy and new nuclear?

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. Somerset is home to Agratas, which is a 40 GWh gigafactory at the Gravity Smart Campus. It is creating jobs and boosting the green economy. It is important that local people in Somerset have the skills to work in those jobs, so does the hon. Member agree that we should encourage local partnerships between schools and industry to teach science, technology, engineering and maths skills and offer those opportunities?

**Tony Vaughan:** The hon. Member is absolutely right, and that is exactly what Skills England is going to do. It is about the collaboration between all the different



stakeholders in society, not just businesses and colleges, to enable us to get to a point where the skills need is being facilitated by education providers.

A high quality vocational education system will improve social mobility, and be one of the best ways to tackle the precarity of the low skill, low productivity and low pay economies that have been built over the last 14 years. I look forward to working with the Government to break down the barriers to opportunity for the 64% of young people who do not go to university, and to build a vocational training system that we can all be proud of.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mark Pritchard (in the Chair):** Order. The debate is very popular and oversubscribed; over 17 Members want to speak. To get everybody in, I am afraid that I will be imposing a time limit of two and a half minutes. I call Jamie Stone, who I am sure will set a great example.

2.42 pm

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on a most interesting speech.

If one visits the Scottish Parliament—some Members may have done or may in future—one cannot help but admire the woodwork. The joinery, carpentry and cabinetmaking are of the highest standard. I was on the Committee that oversaw the building of that Parliament—it nearly cost me my seat in the 2003 Scottish election, but that is beside the point. What struck me very forcibly was that in the United Kingdom we did not have the cabinetmaking and joinery skills to produce a finished article of that quality. Most of the work was done by people from Romania, Poland and other eastern European countries. My point is that when skills disappear, they can sometimes disappear forever.

I worked as a young man at a yard in Wester Ross called Kishorn, where the mighty Ninian Central Platform for the North sea was built. I worked at Nigg, where a number of the hard steel jackets were constructed. At the highpoint of Nigg in the early 1980s, some 5,000 people worked there. They were highly skilled: they were trained in welding, fabrication and all manner of supporting disciplines to achieve some of the greatest structures ever built for the North sea. Today, many of those people are retired or nearly at retirement age, and my big worry—this echoes the point made by the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe—is that although those people could pass on the skills and train young people in them, there is no effort to make that happen. We could be faced with a parallel to the situation I described at the Scottish Parliament: skills could disappear.

I am heartened by the news from Hull that turbine blades are going to be constructed there. That is good news and the Prime Minister was quite correct to emphasise that today. The point is that we should be making far more floating offshore structures in the United Kingdom—the cells, the blades and the towers themselves. While we have the fabrication skills in different parts of the UK, including in my constituency in Scotland, we should get that business going again and be training up the next generation.

In the past, there was an organisation called the Highlands and Islands Development Board. Under the management of the Scottish Government, it has been left to become almost nothing. I am sorry that no SNP Members are here to hear that. They should get up and sort it out, because if that is not reactivated, we are in dead trouble.

2.45 pm

**John Grady** (Glasgow East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing this important debate and for his compelling and comprehensive survey of adult education.

For centuries, Scotland had one of the best education systems in the world, but that is not the case today under the Scottish National party. Attainment has been falling for years. As recent programme for international student assessment reviews show, standards in literacy, mathematics and science are falling, and that is closing doors for children and young people in my seat. The response in Glasgow, I am afraid, has been to cut 172 teaching posts this year, with further cuts to come.

The attainment gap in Scottish schools is widening. Where someone is born is becoming more, not less, important than it was and barriers for poorer children are increasing. It is worth saying that the Government are tackling one of the causes of the attainment gap—poverty—by introducing legislation that will make work pay and tackling family poverty by increasing the national minimum and living wage. However, the SNP is also responsible for the attainment gap in our schools and that is preventing young people from getting good jobs and being able to provide for their families.

A simple example of that failure is that since 2010, there has been a material drop in school attendance. If someone does not go to school, they do not learn. There has also been a general worsening of behaviour in Scottish schools since 2016, shown by figures from the Scottish Government themselves. Put simply, in many Scottish schools, parents, children and teachers have great fear and worry about school behaviour. Nicola Sturgeon made it clear that closing the attainment gap was her main objective, but the SNP has failed on that.

Adult education, which my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe spoke so compellingly about, is critical for jobs for people in Scotland. The OECD recently carried out a study of Scottish adult education and other matters in the west coast of Scotland, where my seat is located. It reported that career guidance for adults is “challenging to access” and financial incentives to invest in reskilling and upskilling workers are very low. That has a terrible impact on low-paid workers in Scotland and a real impact on both economic growth in Scotland and such critical matters as the transition from oil and gas to renewables.

With six seconds to go, I will conclude by saying that elections take place in Holyrood in 2026. It is time for change and a Government that put education first.

2.47 pm

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I commend the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing this broad-ranging debate

[*Damian Hinds*]

on barriers to education opportunities. There are many things that we could talk about, but in 150 seconds I will restrict myself to three things.

The first is about free school meals. Labour Members said some pretty terrible things in 2018 about what we would do to eligibility for free school meals. It did not happen. In reality, the number of children eligible has risen from about one in six in 2010 to one in three most recently, and that is despite employment, the number of children growing up in workless households and the number of people in work and on low pay having come right down. What will the Government do to keep entitlement at around the same level as now even after universal credit roll-out has concluded?

Secondly, I want to ask about the holiday activities and food programme, which has been successful for young people. I am sure the new Government would not dream of cutting it, but a lot of local areas—I know that one in Yorkshire has been discussing the matter very recently—want some reassurance and some forward visibility about what will happen with the HAF programme after the end of this year.

Finally, I wanted to ask about breakfast clubs. The Government have talked a great deal about primary school breakfast clubs and people are quite disappointed about the scale of what they have heard so far. The total percentage of primary schools in England covered by the first phase is, I think, 4.5%. They also talk about breakfast clubs as if they were something novel, whereas in reality there are thousands in schools across the country already. So when they say they need to move slowly because they need to have a pilot, what does the Minister think needs to be piloted? Is it the type of bowl or the angle of pour of the cornflakes, or is it just that they are trying slow down the roll-outs?

Most importantly, I want to ask about secondary schools and special schools. Among the thousands of breakfast clubs, including those supported by the national school breakfast programme, are those in secondary schools and special schools. If we are talking about impacting something like attendance, we can have more of an impact with breakfast clubs at secondary school. Again, I am sure that the Government will not think about cutting that programme—it would be unthinkable to do so—but what will they do? When will they give visibility to secondary schools and special schools about how they will grow the support for breakfast clubs in schools in the future?

2.50 pm

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Pritchard, for your chairmanship. One of the many legacies of the previous Government is a crisis in education and overwhelming barriers to opportunity for young people. Those barriers do not diminish with age, as gaining new skills is difficult in a country where employer investment in training and development has fallen by a third

The UK economy is facing a severe skills shortage. Over the next decade, we will need 350,000 construction apprenticeships, 1.3 million skilled tradespeople and 130 naval nuclear roles. However, apprenticeships have started to decline sharply in recent years, highlighting the need for a focus on them. First, we want to create

more opportunities for apprenticeships. Despite a chronic skills gap, for every apprenticeship, there are three applications. We need to restore financial incentives to small and medium-sized enterprises to take on apprenticeships, make the apprenticeship funding model more transparent, and get into our communities and showcase to children, young people and parents the opportunities that are out there. We need to increase financial support for the apprenticeship rate; it is set at £6.40 at the moment and that is just not enough to survive on. We need to expand foundational apprenticeships and introduce shorter apprenticeships for those who cannot afford the 12 months, and we have to simplify the system and increase the flexibility.

Secondly, it is vital that we value all pathways. The toxic legacy of the Tories in education and the undervaluing of certain subjects—from vocational courses to the arts and social sciences—have meant a loss in those areas. Inspiring young people into diverse sectors is vital, and many young people and their parents do not see trade careers as an option. We must boost careers advice and awareness of apprenticeships. We must use the growth and skills levy, with which the spending of levy money on accessing outreach should be permitted. Careers advice must also highlight the range of training provisions.

Finally, we must bring local people into those opportunities. In my constituency, 8.8% of people are on minimum wage. We have good-quality jobs in industry and technology, as well as naval and maritime opportunities, but they are not being accessed by local people. I believe that if we cannot see it, we cannot do it. We must open up those opportunities to local people, whether they are children or people who want to change career, with outreach into their local communities. In short, we need to overhaul the system and provide equalised, valued places, and we must ensure that local people have access to them.

2.52 pm

**Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): Thank you, Mr Pritchard, for your chairmanship. I wish to contribute to this debate by talking about education opportunities that are close to my heart in the creative industries, and the barriers in this country to a creative education. I come to this place as a proud graduate of University of Chichester in my constituency, and I am living proof that a creative qualification can lead someone down many paths, including to this place.

Years of underfunding and poor organisation means that, despite a booming creative industry in the UK, young people are finding it increasingly difficult to attain the education they need to enter the sector, especially through the state system. There has been a significant drop in arts enrolment at A-level, with a 29% decline since 2010. Government grants for arts education have fallen 40% in real terms over the past decade, and the number of those teaching arts-based subjects dropped by 27% between 2011 and 2024.

I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Interests as a trustee of Chichester Festival Theatre, which has a thriving learning, education and participation department, and it is leading the way in giving access to performing arts education to those from underprivileged backgrounds. Pallant House Gallery also has a fantastic education and outreach department, and both Chichester College and the University of

Chichester are creating the next generation of creatives who will feed into a creative industry, which the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) mentioned, is worth £126 billion to the economy and creates 2.4 million jobs.

The work that charities and organisations are doing in this space to reduce barriers to opportunity is immeasurable, and their work is at risk if local authorities are not appropriately funded to ensure that their non-statutory obligations are protected. The nature of the English baccalaureate means that it restricts take-up of the creative subjects and adds additional barriers to artistic education, which is why the Liberal Democrats are committed to including arts within it and ensuring Ofsted monitors schools so they provide a broad curriculum, including arts, with links to the creative and digital sectors. That would encourage young people to continue with an arts-based qualification, which is shown to be beneficial to their mental health. It would also improve results in subjects such as English and maths, and attainment in education as a whole.

The UK arts and creative industries are crucial to the UK economy and cultural identity, so there should be no barriers to the educational opportunities the sector can bring. I look forward to hearing the Minister commit to recognising the importance of a creative education.

2.55 pm

**Sarah Smith** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Pritchard, for your chairmanship. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing this very important debate.

I first got involved in politics because I thought it wrong that, far too often, the postcode in which a person is born dictates their life outcomes. I have spent the past 17 years working with some of the charities that the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) mentioned to tackle that disadvantage gap. I am incredibly honoured to be the national champion for the opportunity mission, because I believe that the most important element of this Government's priorities is to break down barriers to opportunity and ensure that a child growing up in Clayton-le-Moors in my constituency of Hyndburn has exactly the same opportunities as a child growing up in Chelsea.

I will focus on the issues that we must tackle in the special educational needs and disabilities system, particularly for children and young people who grow up with SEND, but I first want to highlight the absolutely catastrophic situation that we inherited. Sadly, across the country, 20% of children grow up in poverty, but in my constituency of Hyndburn it is 37%. The data is stark. The Institute for Fiscal Studies demonstrates that the earnings of boys who grow up in the most affluent households are 19 percentile points higher than those of boys from the most disadvantaged households, and for girls it is a 27 percentile point difference.

I strongly believe that a strong state education system is the key to overcoming that disparity, so I welcome the significant £1.4 billion schools rebuilding programme and the £2.1 billion we are investing in the repairs fund. That will have a direct impact in my constituency on Altham St James school, Knuzden St Oswald's school, the Hyndburn academy and Haslingden high school.

My inbox is filled with messages from parents who are desperately fighting the education, health and care plan system. I have to write to the head of SEND at the borough council more than to any other stakeholder. Just this week, a constituent told me that she has been waiting over a year for a copy of her daughter's EHCP, after an emergency review hearing. In the meantime, her daughter is out of education, just before her GCSEs and transition to college.

I am conscious of time, but I have some questions for the Minister. The attention on SEND provision across educational settings is welcome, but will she tell us a bit more about how the Government will approach that? When can we expect the children's wellbeing Bill?

2.58 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on securing the debate and setting the scene. I thank him for being here and giving us all an opportunity to participate.

I have two helpful suggestions for the Minister. If things we have done in Northern Ireland have been successful, I want to share them and tell others about them. In Northern Ireland, the Minister of Education, my DUP colleague Paul Givan, has acknowledged that there are barriers and has implemented a new scheme called the RAISE programme. That it is an important opportunity to look afresh at the issues caused by deprivation and drive forward the whole community. It is a place-based approach to remove the barriers to learning and educational achievement. That is important to us because in Northern Ireland, young, white Protestant boys are not achieving their goals. The Government and the Education Minister recognise that and have set about trying to address it. The Education Minister said:

"My department will now continue to engage with key stakeholders in each RAISE locality through a series of workshops over the coming weeks and months—to identify needs, build the evidence base and bring forward strategic plans for consideration."

I know the Minister here is always keen to participate. Has she had the opportunity to discuss that programme with Minister Givan, as she might wish to put it in place here too?

I want to reflect on one of the most effective residents' associations in Strangford. The Scrabo Residents' Association has a project to build up the confidence of young men within communities, so that they will understand that they can find a job, break the cycle within their family and have pride going to their job. I have met some of those young men; their pride in what they can do is excellent to see.

Government have made funding available for some residents' groups to do such projects on the ground, thereby giving people jobs. Success stories include HGV driving, and work in factories and in fields. Will the Minister consider some of the things we have done in Northern Ireland, such as the Raise programme and projects that we are pursuing with community groups? With those we can add value, and add value to the local community at the same time.



3 pm

**Mr Mark Sewards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing the debate.

My experience as a maths teacher at a secondary school taught me about the barriers to opportunity that students face. As I have highlighted these issues many times and will continue to do so as a member of the Education Committee, I want to focus today on the lack of support for young carers, primarily because that has been raised by my constituents.

A recent report by the Carers Trust highlights the issues. It spoke to almost 25,000 pupils and 65 young carer services for the report, which highlighted three main concerns. First, caring can have a significant negative impact on education, opportunity and attendance. In 2022-23, young carers on average missed more than a month of their education, which was nine days more than their classmates who were not carers. The report also found that, in England, almost a half of young carers were persistently absent from secondary school that year.

The second area of concern was that many young carers are not spotted or recognised while they are in education. Only a quarter of the respondents to the survey agreed that teachers had a good understanding of their challenges. Although many local young carer services are promoting awareness-raising campaigns, only a third of them said that they had the capacity to give education providers the help they need to identify young carers. The third area highlighted in the report was the inconsistency of support offered to young carers in education. Almost one in four young carers stated that there was no support for them in their college, school or university.

What can we do to tackle that? There are two things I would like to ask the Minister to consider. First, to consider adding young carers to the Department for Education's daily attendance reporting scheme. That will help to inform schools and local authorities about the young carers who are missing from school and their level of attendance. Secondly, I ask the Minister to consider introducing a young carers' pupil premium. That would ensure that schools had the funding they need to support all the young carers in their educational institutions. In conclusion, I am very keen to support young carers in our community.

3.3 pm

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on securing this important debate.

I want to take the opportunity to highlight an issue that affects the future of many children in our communities—the barriers to educational opportunities faced by children in kinship care. In my constituency, 450 children are living in kinship care, placing us in the top 10% in England and Wales. Those children being raised by relatives or close family friends often face significant challenges that can hinder their educational progress. Many have special educational needs or disabilities,

including social, emotional and mental health issues. More than one in 10 have been diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder.

Those challenges mean that kinship children are much more likely than their peers to attend SEN schools. Kinship children in England alone are over three times more likely to have an EHCP than all other pupils. Despite their needs, kinship children often do not receive the same level of support as those in local authority care. The lack of support can leave them struggling to cope in the classroom and with their post-school opportunities, impacting their ability not only to learn but to thrive. Kinship carers want educators to be better trained to understand the unique challenges that kinship children face, and to provide the support that these children need throughout their lives. It is crucial that we address the barriers and ensure that kinship children receive the support they need to flourish in their educational journey, just to give them a fair crack of the whip. That means improving access to special educational services, providing targeted training for educators and recognising the unique challenges faced by kinship families. By doing so, we can create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for all children, ensuring that, as we have said in our mission statement, every child, regardless of background or circumstances, has the opportunity to succeed.

I want to finish by asking the Minister a couple of questions, including whether the Government are considering taking any specific actions to support the children in kinship care and whether an assessment has been made of the gap in SEND provision disproportionately affecting children in kinship care.

3.6 pm

**Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on securing this important debate.

University is great, but it is not for everyone. We need to have alternatives of equal status, value and quality. West Lothian college in my constituency, under the principal Jackie Galbraith, is a fantastic institution that delivers a range of vocational and non-vocational courses to thousands of pupils and learners every year. But colleges across Scotland have faced a decade of decline under the SNP, with a lack of focus and a lack of funding. Since 2021 there has been a 17% real-terms decline in college funding, with the most recent Scottish budget cutting £32.7 million from the budget for Scottish colleges, including a £12 million cut to student support funding.

However, with a UK Labour Government there is hope for further education in Scotland. The UK Budget delivers an extra £1.5 billion to the Scottish Government this year, and an extra £3.4 billion next year for them to invest in Scottish higher education. The Scottish Government now have the resources to restore Scottish colleges to their full potential, but they must act at pace and with a competence that they have so far not shown in order to do so.

On apprenticeships the picture is no better. The SNP promised to deliver more apprenticeships, but they had to be bounced into funding modern apprenticeships for

the next financial year when a press release from the Scottish Training Federation noted how their failure to fund Skills Development Scotland had left

“apprentices, training providers and employers in limbo”.

Across Livingston constituency I have met employers in renewables, house building and the food and drink sector, and all have spoken to me about the lack of apprenticeships in their sectors.

Now that the Scottish Government have the funding, as my colleague in the Scottish Parliament Pam Duncan-Glancy has said, they have “nowhere to hide” from their record on funding for education and apprenticeships. It is finally time for them to show ambition for Scotland and break down the barriers for people across the Livingston constituency and across Scotland.

3.8 pm

**Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on securing this debate, which is a crucial opportunity to reflect on the steps that we must now take to open up opportunities for all to thrive.

Employers regularly tell me that they are urgently seeking people equipped not just with the skills of today but the skills of tomorrow. They are preparing for new waves of technology, evolving processes and increased automation—preparing for the future. In my constituency of Southampton Itchen we see great examples of that at the National Oceanography Centre and in the transformative technology at Ocean Infinity. Those and many other organisations embody the future that we are building—an economy fit for the 21st century. Only if we plan with intention and foresight for that future will we be able to break down the barriers to opportunity. That is why it is essential that Ministers take advantage of the upcoming curriculum review and the establishment of Skills England to build the foundations of what my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe has set out today and move away from high stakes assessment, pivoting instead towards providing young people in schools with the academic base and the practical, applicable skills and opportunities that exist today and that inspire and excite them.

What might all that look like? It is a curriculum that is fit for, as hon. Members have said, kids with SEND, those with care experience, and those who are young carers. It is about practical skills, including financial and media literacy. It is about an ambitious approach to work experience. It is about realising the value of early visits to sites of industry and creative companies, which really inspire. It is about building resilience in our children and young people.

In my constituency, Southampton college and Itchen college are working hard to equip young people with the qualifications and skills—the apprenticeships—they need and the preparation they deserve. It is institutions such as these that may benefit from the £300 million cash investment that we announced in the Budget. That kind of targeted support and a revamped programme of study and skills development will drive meaningful change in our communities. As someone for whom education made all the difference, and as the proud husband of a

secondary school teacher, I know that it all starts with the foundations of education. We can now look forward to real investment in them.

3.10 pm

**Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on securing this important debate. With 4.3 million children living in poverty in the UK and one in four in my constituency, covering Northwich, Winsford and Middleswich, it is an urgent debate. Child poverty latches on to children before they are born, stays with them throughout their educational journey and follows them into adulthood.

We know that education is the key to lifting people out of poverty. UNESCO estimates that world poverty could be cut in half if all adults completed secondary education. It is vital that we tackle each barrier to that outcome head on. There are many barriers to choose from, and we have heard many today. We could discuss high transport costs or low availability of services. We could discuss the effect of poor-quality housing or the lack of available social housing.

As a number of my colleagues have done, I will focus on provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities. In the House, we have heard time and again about inadequate provision for young people with SEND. Every young person deserves the opportunity to thrive in an environment that meets their needs. Despite the best intentions of everyone involved, the current system is broken and actively incentivises bad outcomes for everyone. The recently published National Audit Office report clearly sets out the stark inadequacies of a system that has not only lost the confidence of families but is adversarial, causes immense trauma for children and parents, and sets young people up to fail. It is abundantly clear that we need to rebuild the system from the ground up to ensure that it is not just functional, but robust and fully equipped to provide the necessary support for those that need it.

We need more early intervention, and improved teacher training so that schools are better able to identify and adapt to SEN. We need nothing short of a revolution in how mainstream schools, particularly at secondary level, approach SEN, accompanied by more resource provision. We need to increase capacity in our state-run special schools and avoid the use of private schools that cost local authorities five or six times as much per child. Above all, we need to rebuild trust between parents and a system that has failed them for too long.

I am pleased that the Government have made it a priority to put in place a SEN system that will break down barriers to opportunity and ensure that every child can achieve and thrive. I will champion this crucial mission on behalf of my constituents.

3.13 pm

**Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): Something about under your chairmanship—sorry, I have forgotten the line, Mr Pritchard. My apologies.

**Mark Pritchard (in the Chair):** No worries at all. I will take anything—within reason.

**Emily Darlington:** Thank you, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for bringing forward this really important debate. Education is the best way in the world to bring peace and prosperity, and for people in my constituency of Milton Keynes to get better jobs and have better lives.

In the 1960s, Harold Wilson dreamed of a university of the air. Jennie Lee made that a reality through the Open University, which she chose to base in Milton Keynes—I am very lucky in that. The OU is so important for educational opportunity, because it makes no distinction based on someone's formal educational qualifications. In fact, it actively encourages those without formal qualifications to come forward and be everything that they can be. It is absolutely crucial for social mobility. More than a quarter of the undergraduates live in the most deprived areas across the UK, and more than 37,000 students last year had some kind of disability, particularly those who had been failed by the current school system and wanted the opportunity to make the most of their lives.

The most important thing about the OU is its flexible learning model, which has been taken forward by many colleges and universities right across the UK and the world, including the Russell Group. At the heart of any ambitious Labour Government is education, education, education for everyone. Being for everyone means that it has to be at the heart of our universities, colleges and schools, and so far this generation is not seeing that investment. I ask the Minister: how will we transform those opportunities for people in Milton Keynes and for my daughters, who are currently going through school?

3.15 pm

**Kenneth Stevenson** (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing this debate. As a former senior lecturer at a further education college in Glasgow, I recognise the importance of this issue across the UK, but I will focus my brief remarks on Scotland.

In Scotland we have had 17 years of SNP Government: 17 years of money being spent on projects that have not worked and 17 years of further education being treated as an afterthought. As a former FE lecturer in engineering, I will always place particular value on STEM courses. A once-great industrial nation, Scotland has communities such as mine in Airdrie and Shotts where the industries of the past still shape who we are today, and indeed where we will go in the future. However, I cannot stress enough the importance of the word “opportunity”. Opportunity for a decent education beyond our school years and for well-paid, secure employment is something we may take for granted, but for many in my constituency it is a distant possibility rather than a reality.

I took the time to attend a meeting of the Educational Institute of Scotland, my former union, in North Lanarkshire, and hear directly from FE staff. The words “undervalued”, “overworked” and “underpaid” came up again and again. As a former senior lecturer myself, it was tough to hear that the challenges of working in the sector had worsened only a few years after I left, but my passion to see renewed focus on and investment in FE has only strengthened.

The lack of investment is understandable from a Scottish Government that are financially illiterate. We have come to expect this narrow *Weltanschauung* from them. However, we must understand how it came about: too many people placed at the top of institutions in our country who have never had a trade, never worked their way up learning every aspect of their trade or business, and never understood the basics of how industry works and what technical and human skills are required for a modern workforce.

I attended the Open University—an unashamedly Labour policy—and place significant value on a good education and the importance of opportunity in an individual's outcomes. I will use my time in this place to fight to eliminate barriers to that, and I look forward to working with hon. Members in doing so. Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe for securing this important and timely debate.

3.18 pm

**Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing this debate. As a former teacher in secondary education, like many others here, this issue is a particular passion. There are a multitude of situational, institutional and dispositional barriers that impact people. Those barriers will impact each and every one of us over the course of our lives, and across our constituencies many people will be affected by those barriers layered on top of each other.

I will talk about three types of barrier in particular. They were identified by the former Government, but I believe they need to be tackled by this Government. The first is age. We know that over the course of our lifetimes, many of us might have multiple careers, depending on future election results. Many of our constituents will also have multiple jobs and multiple careers, and they need to be given opportunities in the employment landscape to engage in continuous professional development. They need access to courses—not necessarily university courses, but other types of courses. What can be done to promote continuous professional development in the workplace? We know that is age-related as well.

I want to highlight the fact that BAE Systems, a major employer in my constituency that just invested £200 million extra in the Rochester aerospace division, is promoting continuous professional development within its employment base, as well as additional apprenticeships for those aged 18 and over. That type of large-scale initiative can also link with the Government's investment strategy around the green new deal, and where we can set the direction of the future and align it with colleges and aspiration.

The second barrier, as many of my colleagues have mentioned, is SEND access. Having met headteachers last week in Holmesdale School and Holborough Lakes in my constituency, I can tell hon. Members now that local authorities, including Kent, are struggling with getting provision into schools and supporting our students. What can we do to ensure that this appalling legacy is redressed?

The final barrier is early years access. One of the proudest achievements of the last Labour Government was Sure Start, which gave educational opportunities.



We know that if we target students at the very youngest age, outcomes can be positive at the end of their lives. That life course is absolutely critical if we are to get aspiration into our young people, so what will the Government do around early years provision so that we can get support to parents and give educational opportunities to all our young people?

3.20 pm

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Pritchard, for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for bringing this important discussion to the House.

Like many who have spoken today, I am a former teacher, and I know of the huge impact that a child's home life can have on educational attainment. I feel it is really important that when we talk about children's educational attainment, we consider not only exam results, but the wider school experience—sometimes we call it the hidden curriculum. In my constituency of Harlow, there are pockets of high child poverty. Some 17.3% of children in Harlow live in low-income families compared with the Essex average of 12.8%, and we saw that during the terrible pandemic, in which nearly 8,000 families had food parcels delivered to them. This will have a huge impact on children—no child will be able to learn if they are hungry—and I welcome this Government's pledge of free breakfast clubs in every primary school.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mr Sowards) mentioned, I will speak about a specific group of young people who are often forgotten: young carers. Some 38% of young carers surveyed reported that they regularly miss school because of their caring situation. No young person can learn when they are not in school, and no one can focus with the anxiety of being away from those who they care for. I welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who has pledged to make young carers an integral part of the recently announced youth strategy, and I ask that young carers be a golden thread in any future educational reform.

I recently had the privilege of inviting a group of young carers to Parliament. One young girl highlighted that when she rang up her university and said that she could no longer attend because of her caring commitment, she was not asked any follow-up questions. We also know that young carers are not classified as disadvantaged in education. Another young carer said that he felt there was no description that fitted him when he went to university. When he went on the university's website, there was no description of a young carer that fitted his young caring abilities.

I will finish with an ask. We know that this lack of awareness of young carers across education and universities needs to be recognised and responded to. I want to see young carer leads as a standard, not an exception.

3.23 pm

**David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on securing this important debate.

Barriers to learning and skills development affect not only children and young people in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove, but adults. Upskilling is key to economic participation and engagement in the labour market, yet last week, when I met our local Staffordshire chamber of commerce, it highlighted concerns from local employers about a lack of basic skills development among young people and adults at all points in their careers, so it is important that we focus on helping people to achieve those qualifications. Our city council, local further education and independent providers work incredibly hard to upskill adults, and that is reflected in our higher participation rates in further education and skills. Tackling barriers to educational opportunity is really important in promoting social mobility in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove, and many of our local schools and colleges focus on and recognise that.

However, as we know, barriers to opportunity are multifaceted. They are linked to deprivation, housing conditions and household income, and improving educational outcomes goes hand in hand with addressing socioeconomic inequality.

Perhaps the most significant barriers to educational opportunity in Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove are the high rates of speech, numeracy and language deficiency in our early years outcomes. As we all know, early years development is a significant predictor of our educational outcomes across the whole life course. Sadly, last year in Stoke-on-Trent, only one in two of our two-year-olds had a good level of development compared with nearly 80% in England, and the level of development locally has been declining for a number of years.

Tackling barriers to educational opportunity begins in the very early years. I hope the Minister will agree that investment in our early years is critical to tackling those barriers.

3.25 pm

**Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing this important debate.

I want to focus on the importance of the fabric of the buildings in which we deliver our educational opportunities, and on one particular school in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South—Trentham academy. I have been a teacher for 30 years, and I was astonished at what I saw when I visited recently. I met the headteacher, Mr Mike Whittingham, to discuss the Trentham academy estate and to see for myself the challenges that it has faced.

I will say at the outset that Trentham is an excellent school. It has achieved a “good” Ofsted rating, with “outstanding” in some areas, and it is highly oversubscribed. The 750-capacity school already has more than 790 pupils, and last year it received 580 applications for new students as the first choice of parents. It delivers excellent education. It has a strong ethos, the teachers are smiling and it is a great little school, so when I visited I could not have been more shocked at the state of it. There are rotting floors and mould in some classrooms. There are annual rat infestations, with fly infestations following. Rats and other vermin have repeatedly fallen into classrooms, into teachers' hair and, worst of all, into their cups of tea, which is enough of an excuse in itself to rebuild the school.

[Dr Allison Gardner]

There are only five female toilet cubicles, three male cubicles and 11 cubicles in a unisex toilet, which I would not enter—not because it is unisex, but because it is just not fit for purpose. It is technically against building regulations, and the disabled accessible toilets are inadequate. Legislation says that there must be one toilet per 20 pupils. Trentham academy currently has one toilet per 40 pupils, and I would not go in some of those. I could continue. Another issue is the poor fire doors and the real fire safety risks.

I welcome the school rebuilding fund, with £2.4 billion for school maintenance and £1.4 billion for school rebuilding. I ask the Minister merely for the money to rebuild the school, and I assure her that we will deliver a cracking school with great education, and fill the desperate need for extra secondary school places in Stoke-on-Trent.

3.28 pm

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on securing such an important and wide-ranging debate. Tackling barriers to educational opportunity is critical to everything—to the lives of our young people, to the strength of our economy, and to the future of our country and society. Given the breadth of the topic, I hope Members will forgive me for not being able to cover everything in depth, but I will try to cover as much territory as I can.

Children face all sorts of barriers to the education they deserve, whether that is growing up in poverty at home, or getting the necessary support for special educational needs, disabilities or mental ill health. Some children may grow up in foster care, and more than 140,000 grow up in kinship care, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) discussed. They may be young carers, which the hon. Members for Leeds South West and Morley (Mr Sowards) and for Harlow (Chris Vince) mentioned. None of their needs should be forgotten—everything from hunger, to abuse, to the damaging impact of social media should be taken into account. They are all barriers that young people face in their education today.

It is not just about children at school; the vital role of education starts in the early years and continues throughout people's lives. Indeed, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe opened the debate by focusing on adult education and skills, which is vital at a time when the demands of our economy are changing so rapidly and unpredictably. It has never been more important that adults have the opportunities they need to learn new skills so that they can get well-paid, secure new jobs. I look forward to seeing the detail that the new Government bring forward in their reform of the apprenticeship levy and their review of the reform of level 3 qualifications. I also hope they will look at boosting apprenticeship pay for young people, which is out of step with the national minimum wage.

Rather than speak about all those things in any detail, I will focus on a few barriers and offer a few solutions that I hope the Minister will consider carefully. One of the biggest barriers to educational opportunities is, of course, poverty. With just over 4 million children

in the UK estimated to be living in poverty, that equates to nine in every classroom. In a country like ours, that is utterly shameful. Many hon. Members who are former teachers will recognise the phrase often said to me when I go into schools, which is that school staff see themselves as the fourth emergency service as they deal with poverty and the social issues that brings. Whether it is children living in poor housing, with poor health or with challenging relationships at home, we all hear from teachers who spend time helping disadvantaged pupils with food, uniforms and other basics that their families are struggling to provide. That simply cannot go on.

I suggest to the Minister that there are three ways to tackle poverty, and child poverty in particular. First, we should abolish the cruel two-child benefit cap, which denies more than one and a half million children and their families the support they deserve. Its abolition would lift some 300,000 children out of poverty immediately, giving them the chance to learn, to grow and to access the life chances that are available to some of their more well-off classmates.

Secondly, we should extend eligibility for free school meals. Food poverty poses a particular barrier to education: hungry children struggle to learn and they often struggle with their behaviour. They face a fundamental barrier that many of their classmates may be lucky enough to avoid, and there is simply no excuse in 2024 for a child to be hungry at school. By expanding free school meals to all children in poverty, we could ensure that 900,000 children are no longer at risk of being hungry in the afternoon and having to learn on an empty stomach. I urge the Minister to make that commitment.

If that is too big an ask of the Chancellor, a good first step would be the auto-enrolment of all those who are eligible for free school meals. In Lib Dem-led Durham county council, the introduction of auto-enrolment this academic year has already led to some 2,500 extra children receiving a hot, healthy meal in the middle of the school day. All the evidence tells us that those children will have improved educational and health outcomes.

Thirdly, we should tackle the attainment gap through a tutoring guarantee. The attainment gap between disadvantaged and more well-off pupils has widened every year since 2020. The evidence is clear that tutoring can be highly effective in improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged young people. Small-group tutoring showed its value under the national tutoring programme, which was poorly implemented at first, but when school leaders were empowered to deliver it, the evidence has shown that tutoring does not just lead to improved attainment but can help to build pupils' confidence and benefit their attendance, which is currently such a big problem in our schools. Funding for tutoring ran out in July this year, so will the Government commit to a national tutoring guarantee, so that every disadvantaged pupil can access the support they need? It would be a small step with a huge impact that would help to break down one of the biggest barriers to education in our society today.

Hon. Members have spoken about the huge crisis in our special educational needs and disabilities system, which affects one in six pupils. Only 17% of SEND pupils achieve grade 5 or above at GCSE in English and Maths, compared with 51% of other pupils, and they are much more likely to be suspended or permanently

excluded. At the beginning of last year, when I visited Feltham young offender institution, the vast majority of young men there had special educational needs and were out of education for a lot of their childhood.

There is simply not enough mainstream support available at school. Coupled with a lack of specialist provision, that has left many children languishing at home without proper access to education. This is an enormous challenge that deserve many debates of its own, and we have had many well-subscribed debates in this place since the general election. Indeed, last month I secured an urgent question on the National Audit Office report that has been mentioned. I urge the Minister to look again at Liberal Democrat proposals for a new national body for SEND to support children with the most complex needs, for more training and specialists to identify needs early, and for speeding up the building of state special schools.

We know that SEND is closely related to poor mental health services. Our mental health services are struggling to keep pace with demand, and there is huge unmet need. Research conducted by the Liberal Democrats earlier this year revealed that over 300,000 children are stuck on a mental health waiting list. Many of those children will struggle to learn properly and will almost certainly experience their condition getting worse while they are waiting for support. With the number of children with a diagnosable mental health condition now hitting one in five, putting a dedicated mental health professional in every school, both primary and secondary, is urgent.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) made a brief comment on the early years sector, which has not been talked about much in the debate. After years of Conservative underfunding of the early years sector, the Labour Government are introducing a national insurance rise that will hit many private and not-for-profit early years providers. The Early Years Alliance said this could

“push the sector to the brink of collapse.”

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about whether she is pressing her colleagues in the Treasury to ensure that sufficient funding is available, so that parents do not have to foot the bill once again and more disadvantaged parents and their children are not forced out of early years provision, because the early years are when we can make the biggest impact on educational attainment.

I recognise that all these solutions cost money, but it is time we stopped seeing our children as a cost item in a profit and loss account. It is time we saw our children and young people and their education as one of the best investments we can make—an investment in the potential of every individual, in our society and in our economy. This Government cannot be serious about growth if they do not invest in educational opportunity.

3.37 pm

**Laura Trott** (Sevenoaks) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) on securing the debate and on his focus on the specific issue—it was a very good speech. I echo the commendation from him and the hon. Member for Livingston (Gregor Poynton) of the work of colleges and the important things they do.

I will get the ding-dong out the way. I gently point out to the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe that apprenticeship starts under the Conservatives went up quite considerably from 2010 to 2022-23, from 279,000 to 337,000. I am sure he will want to reflect that in his closing remarks. I also want to pick up on something said by the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin). We are never going to get anywhere if we talk about a toxic legacy on education under the Conservatives. We all want to make progress on this stuff. In 2010, we were behind Germany and France in PISA; now we are ahead. Obviously, we can contrast that with what happened in Wales and Scotland.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) was absolutely right that the SNP has failed to close the gap for disadvantaged children. If we are going to make progress, which we all want to do, on raising educational standards and helping disadvantaged children, it is important to look at why some things have gone well, and one of the reasons is a knowledge-based curriculum. I say to the hon. Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) that we need to be careful about what we do in this area, because the worst thing we can do for disadvantaged children is dilute academic standards.

I will get to the meat of the debate now because I think I have covered that. We are all interested in the number of apprenticeships going up. I would be interested to know from the Minister how much apprenticeship start numbers will go up and whether the Government stand by the pledge to spend up to 50% of the apprenticeship levy on other types of training. That was committed to before the election. I am not clear as to whether that is still the case now, so it would be helpful for the Minister to give some clarification on that specific point.

I agree with the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) that once skills have gone, it is very difficult to get them back. What is the Minister doing to safeguard specific high-value and rare skills, particularly in the craft area? I hope she answers correctly the brilliant contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on free school meals, holiday activities and breakfast clubs, all of which are crucial to driving forward the progress of disadvantaged children.

I share interest in the question asked by the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) on when the children's wellbeing Bill will be introduced. The Lib Dem spokesman, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), mentioned the importance of driving down the number of absences, which we absolutely want to do on a cross-party basis. We will very much support the register, which I believe is going to be in that Bill, but when will that Bill be brought forward and how does the Minister intend to make it work?

The speeches made about young carers by the hon. Members for Leeds South West and Morley (Mr Swards) and for Harlow (Chris Vince) were very moving and absolutely right, and I am interested in the Minister's comments on them. The mention by the hon. Member for Twickenham of state special schools was important. I was pleased to see that they have not been paused, but given the speech given last week by the Secretary of State, will the Minister confirm that she still believes in



[Laura Trott]

the principle of having separate special schools? Will they be continued and will parents have the choice as to whether they send their kids to them?

I very much echo the comments from the hon. Member for Twickenham about the importance of early years. I will quibble with her about the funding that has gone into early years, which obviously increased massively under the last Government, but we have a real problem now with early years funding. The national insurance contributions change will have a significant impact on the sector. It will mean that, in contrast to what the Prime Minister said today, costs for parents will go up. Also, childcare provision has had no guarantees that the Government's funding formula will include provision for the increased cost from NICs. Obviously, under the previous Government we set it up so that the minimum wage increases will be taken into account. Will the Minister please confirm today that the increased costs from employers' national insurance contributions will be taken into account by the Government in the funding formula? Otherwise, we are going to have a real crisis with provision. The Minister needs to recognise that and take it away if she cannot answer now.

More broadly, this has been a helpful and interesting debate. Education is an area where we need to work together to make progress for disadvantaged children. I say to all Labour Members that the Conservatives will drive that forward by insisting on high academic standards and the rigorous holding to account of schools for their performance, and by ensuring that the curriculum is knowledge based and drives children forward. We will support the Government if they seek to drive up apprenticeship starts and improve vocational education, and we will work as hard as we can with them on improving the current absence rates, because we know they are hitting disadvantaged children.

**Mark Pritchard (in the Chair):** Order. Before I call the Minister, I should say that if she wants to make time for the mover of the motion to have a minute or two at the end, I think we have time, if she is so minded.

3.43 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** It is a real honour to respond to this debate on this important matter, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing it, and for its wide scope as well.

I also thank all hon. Members for their contributions—I will try to answer their wide remarks and questions as best I can—and I want to mention a few. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) mentioned kinship carers and SEND, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) also talked about SEND. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) talked about the need for buildings, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about adding value. The hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) talked about issues in the creative industries, and the Government's response to them. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) spoke about early years, and there have also been conversations about young carers, breakfast clubs and so on.

The Government believe that the opportunity to enjoy a good life with a great job, and to secure a home, should belong to everyone. Every child and young person should have the opportunity to succeed, no matter who they are, where they are from or how much their parents earn, but as a nation we are yet to fulfil that promise. A person's background often counts more towards success than effort and enterprise, and too many children are held back by the circumstances they are born into. Children from the lowest-earning families, those from diverse backgrounds, those with special educational needs and disabilities, those with experience of the care system and young carers face too many barriers to building the best life they can.

Too many children and young people grow up seeing success as something that happens to others, but it also belongs to them. That is why this new Government will be a mission-led one, with a defining mission to break the unfair link between background and opportunity. The opportunity mission will build opportunity for all by giving every child the best start in life. It will help them achieve, thrive and build skills for opportunity and growth, and will ensure security.

Building skills for opportunity and growth is key to the opportunity mission. From the age of 16 onwards lies the transition into the world of work and future opportunities. We will ensure that every young person can follow the pathway that is right for them, whether that is through high-quality apprenticeships, colleges or universities, including Open university. The right skills and courses give people the ability to progress into good jobs and not shy away from opportunity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe focused mostly on skills and technical education. I assure all hon. Members that the Government are focused on opportunities for everyone, whatever their background, age, ability and identity. We are ambitious for children and young people, and for their aspirations. Our higher education system is globally recognised for its excellence, which is great. The Government recognise that university is right for many, but that it is not the only option. Apprenticeships and skills are absolutely the right option for others. That is why we are determined to get it right and support young people who wish to take that path. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that under 14 years of Conservative Government, the number of apprenticeships has plummeted. The apprenticeship levy was exposed as inadequate.

**Jamie Stone:** Will the Minister give way?

**Janet Daby:** I have so much to get through that I am afraid I cannot.

Skills policy has too often been made in isolation, leading to a system that is confusing for employers and individuals, and that does not lead to the right jobs for our population. Skills shortage vacancies in England more than doubled between 2017 and 2022, from 226,500 to 531,200. Too few young people—indeed, people of all ages—have been able to gain the benefits of a quality post-16 education. Those figures are shocking.

We need to do so much more to ensure that people do not face unemployment, low wages and poor health outcomes. The lack of a clear plan has led to widespread skill shortages in areas such as construction, manufacturing, hospitality, information and communication, healthcare

and social care. That is why meeting the skill needs of the next decade is central to delivering the Government's five missions: economic growth, opportunity for all, a stronger NHS, safer streets and clean energy. We aim to create a clear, flexible, high-quality skills system that supports people of all ages, breaks down barriers to opportunity and drives economic growth.

We have not stood still. Last month's Budget included an investment of an additional £300 million in further education to ensure that young people develop the skills they need. It also included £950 million of skills capital funding, including £300 million to ensure that college estates are in good condition so they meet students' learning needs. We have also commenced a curriculum and assessment review, which is now in full swing with roadshows up and down the country. It will deliver a curriculum that is rich in knowledge, strong in skills and led by evidence. We have announced the youth guarantee, which will help to ensure that young people have the opportunity to acquire the skills that they need.

We will reform the apprenticeship levy into a growth and skills levy to deliver greater flexibility for both learners and employers. As a first step we will introduce foundation apprenticeships to give more young people a foot in the door. The new foundation apprenticeships will support clear progression pathways into further work-based training and sustained employment. We will support and fill the pipeline of new talent that employers need. We are investing £40 million to support the development and delivery of foundation apprenticeships, as well as apprenticeships of a shorter duration that will provide further flexibility for employers, as so many have called for.

We have also listened to feedback about qualifications; concerns were expressed about the rapid pace of reforms from the previous Government, about the quality of qualifications and about how they do not always serve students well. This Government are determined to do better—and indeed we will. We have therefore announced a short-term internal review of qualifications reform, which clearly signals our intention to balance the range of concerns and to provide clarity in the qualifications landscape. We believe that this is the best way to support students, unlock opportunity, harness talent and drive growth.

We have introduced Skills England in shadow form. It will ensure we have the highly trained workforce needed to deliver national, regional and local skills for the next decade, aligned with the upcoming industrial strategy. Skills England will ensure that there is a comprehensive choice of apprenticeships, training and technical qualifications for individuals and employers to access. Skills England will ensure that the skills system is clear, and that both young people and older adults can navigate it, strengthening career pathways into jobs across the economy. It will increase the quality and quantity of skills development in the workplace by providing an authoritative assessment of national and regional skills needs in the economy, now and in the future.

Moving to the school rebuilding programme, this Government have increased next year's capital allocation to improve school buildings to £2.1 billion, which is £300 million more than this year. We have also committed to £1.4 billion to support the current school rebuilding programme to deliver 518 projects across England.

Many issues have been raised about children with special educational needs and disabilities and the anxieties of their parents. On reform, this Government's ambition is that all children and young people with SEND will receive the right support to succeed in their education and as they move into adult life. We are committed to improving inclusiveness and expertise in mainstream schools, and to ensuring that special school provision continues to meet children's most complex needs. That will restore parents' trust, as they will know that their child is getting the support they desperately need. We will work with the sector, as it is essential that we join our valued partners in that shared vision.

There were questions about free school meals and ensuring that children are eligible. We have a mission to break down the barriers to opportunity, and to confront child poverty. The continued provision of free school meals to disadvantaged children plays an important role in that. The Government spend around £1.5 billion annually on free lunches for over 3 million pupils. As with all Government programmes, we will keep our approach open and continue to review it. It remains our ambition that no child should go hungry.

We are also doing a child poverty review. The new child poverty ministerial taskforce will drive cross-Government action on child poverty, starting by overseeing the development of an ambitious child poverty strategy, which will be published next spring. The taskforce publication of 23 October, "Tackling Child Poverty: Developing Our Strategy", sets out our framework for how the strategy will be developed, harnessing all available levers to deliver a reduction in child poverty in this Parliament as part of our ambitious 10-year strategy, which addresses its root causes.

On breakfast clubs, we will remove barriers to opportunities by ensuring that every primary school pupil, no matter their circumstance, is well prepared for school. From April 2025, free breakfast clubs will be available for up to 750 early adopters ahead of the national roll-out. Early adopters will allow us to identify and tackle barriers to implementing the full breakfast club roll-out. That is the first step in our commitment to enable breakfast clubs in all primary schools.

**Damian Hinds:** Before the Minister moves on, my main question on breakfast clubs was about what happens to the national school breakfast programme for secondary and special schools. We have heard a lot about primary schools, but we have not heard much about secondary and special schools in disadvantaged areas. Is she in a position to tell us a little more about that?

**Janet Daby:** This Government are committed to tackling child poverty. As I have already outlined as regards the poverty taskforce, many of the issues and areas are continuing to be reviewed and worked out. We are determined to bring down child poverty. On the specific areas the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, more information will be coming, but I am afraid he will have to be patient, as we had to be patient for the past 14 years.

I also add that through the children's wellbeing Bill, which has been mentioned, the Government will look to introduce further strategies for improving the outcomes for children and young people, and to make the reform

[Janet Daby]

and changes that we need. The Bill will be introduced, as parliamentary time allows, and we appreciate Members' patience.

Time is quickly moving on and running out. I could say so much more about so many other areas that were mentioned, but I am afraid I will have to move to a close. We will try to respond where we can, but I ask Members, please, to continue to write in and ask questions. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe for securing the debate on such an important matter and I hope the House appreciates that I made every attempt to respond.

3.58 pm

**Tony Vaughan:** I thank the Minister for her response and everyone present for their contributions to this important debate. Members have highlighted an inheritance of widening inequality, increasing child poverty, narrowing opportunities and an education system crying out for change. They have also highlighted that the Government's proposals for reform give us cause for optimism: the curriculum review, Skills England, reform of the apprenticeship levy, improved teacher training on SEND, free breakfast clubs in primary schools and a properly funded education system.

There are of course particular barriers to opportunity. We heard, for example, from my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) on SEND; my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) on young carers; my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) on kinship carers; and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) on poor school buildings. There is a long way to go.

To respond to the points made by Opposition Members, after the apprenticeship levy was introduced in 2017, there was a 31% fall in apprenticeship starts. That fact cannot be denied; it is a fact that is being responded to by this Government, and it is part of the inheritance that we are actively addressing. I am proud to be a Labour MP supporting a Labour Government. We are the party that introduced Sure Start, the single most effective measure for reducing child poverty. The measures we are taking will help ensure that every child, regardless of background, has access to the opportunities that they deserve.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the matter of tackling barriers to educational opportunities.

## Kinship Carers

4 pm

**Mark Pritchard (in the Chair):** Alistair Strathern will move the motion and then the Minister will respond. I remind colleagues that, as is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will be no opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up the debate.

**Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for kinship carers.

It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I start by welcoming my hon. Friend the Minister to her place. It is a real pleasure to see her in this role. Not only does she bring experience as someone who has worked in children's social care, but her compassion and drive to improve situations for young people right across the country will be a powerful motivator to ensure that we deliver the change we have committed to as a Government, and will benefit of kinship carers in my constituency and right across the country over the coming years.

I am delighted to introduce my second debate on kinship care, having held one in the immediate aftermath of the last Government strategy earlier this year. As MPs, we get to meet, I think it is fair to say, quite a wide range of campaigners, all of whom are very powerful. I have to say that some are more convincing than others, but there can be no group more powerful or moving to work with than kinship carers. I was privileged, before I was even an MP, to be grabbed by Carol and Amanda, two kinship carers in the then constituency, to talk through some of the challenges they were facing. It was impossible not to be moved by their determination to do right by the young people in their care and young people in kinship care right across the country, so we stepped forward and agreed to work together.

I was soon to find that kinship carers are, rightly, an incredibly tenacious group of campaigners. One week after I was elected, Carol and Amanda pitched up at my surgery to ask what I had managed to do so far, and what I would be doing in the next week, to take their cause forward. It should have come as no surprise, then, that one month after my re-election—albeit in a slightly different constituency—they were beating down my door again. They did so because this is a cause that matters. Kinship carers do amazing work on behalf of the young people in their care right across the country. They step up at a moment of real trauma for a young person and ensure, through love, compassion and dedication, that everything possible is done to give that young person the stability, the common identity and the compassion they need to thrive.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, who is equally tenacious, and so is everyone else in this room. Last year in Northern Ireland, there were 3,801 children in care. We welcomed the boost for foster carers earlier this year, but we did not see a boost for kinship carers. Does he agree that there must be more financial provision for kinship caring across all of this great United Kingdom?

**Alistair Strathern:** I thank the hon. Member for making incredibly poignant remarks, as he always does in these debates. I think I have yet to attend a debate



here where he has not brought something to the table, and I could not agree more that we need to be thinking about the breadth of support that kinship carers get. I hope to touch on some of those points later in my remarks.

As a former councillor and lead for children's services, I was also privileged to work closely with kinship carers and see at first hand the impact they could have in transforming the outcomes of the young people in their care. They were making sure, in those difficult moments, that the young people had the stability of place, the familiar face and the retention of their identity needed in order to be as resilient as possible in the face of more traumatic circumstances than many of us will ever have to comprehend or grapple with personally. It came as no surprise, then, that the independent review of children's social care a few years ago remarked clearly that kinship carers deliver far better outcomes than many other parts of the care sector, but are often underserved by a care network that just is not set up to fully consider them, fully recognise their needs and fully embrace the role they can play in supporting young people through that really difficult moment.

**Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that kinship carers like David and Pamela in my constituency not only should have equal access to vital financial allowances, but should get the training and support they need when they take on this vital role?

**Alistair Strathern:** I thank my hon. Friend for that powerful intervention. It highlights the breadth of support we need to be considering for kinship carers—not just the pilots that have already been announced, but some of the wider training and therapeutic support needed to ensure that they are equipped to support the young people they are taking on caring responsibilities for.

This debate comes at a critical time for kinship carers across the country. They are finally having their voice heard, and we as parliamentarians owe it to them to live up to the commitments we have made over the last few years. It was fantastic at a recent reception to hear my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education listening so attentively to one of the kinship carers, Poppy, talking through some of the challenges she faces and what she would like to change so that kinship carers and those in kinship care across the country are finally fully supported by the Government and their local authorities.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): I compliment my hon. Friend on securing this debate and being a champion for kinship carers, not just in this Parliament but previously. Does he recognise that the situation for kinship families is urgent and that the inaction that we saw from the previous Government means that many kinship carers are unable to continue? If they could not continue, it would push more children back into an already overstretched care system. Does he agree that though the 10 pilots are welcome, the best way to support families would be a non-means-tested mandatory allowance for all kinship families?

**Alistair Strathern:** I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful intervention. It is important to recognise the urgency. We have inherited a situation in which one in eight kinship carers are worried that they might not be

able to carry on their caring responsibility, while thousands of other young people across the country could be placed into productive, meaningful and nourishing kinship care placements but are currently denied that by our antiquated children's social care system.

**Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): As has just been mentioned, many kinship carers are on the breadline. They are not managing. Is it not right that instead of just patting them on the back and putting our arm around them, we should ensure that they receive adequate allowances to give the children they are looking after the best chance in life?

**Alistair Strathern:** I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful point. He rightly highlights that financial support is a crucial part of the package that kinship carers need. I am really excited that the Government are finally bringing forward the £44 million needed to get on with the pilots. However, it is important that we do not just put an arm around kinship carers, but provide a wider range of therapeutic support and advice. Both financial and non-financial support will be crucial.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the £44 million and the 10 pilots are a groundbreaking initiative on the part of this Government—something that kinship care families have long awaited and campaigned for? This is just the start, but we cannot have everything that we might want right now.

**Alistair Strathern:** Absolutely. Since they took office, we have seen from the new Secretary of State, the Minister and the Government an urgency that, finally, is starting to meet the needs of the moment, and the needs of young people in kinship care and their carers. Whether it is making sure that we finally have a kinship care ambassador to actively champion the role of kinship carers and take to task local authorities that do not always provide the support they need, as some kinship carers in the room might be able to attest to; bringing forward statutory guidance and a framework to ensure that we have more in place to recognise the values of wider family networks in planning decisions for young people, and to do everything we can to remove the barriers to placing young people in kinship care; or—

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): As the previous Member for Mid Bedfordshire, the hon. Member knows how profoundly important this issue is to constituents like Amanda and Carol, who are tenacious. Does he agree that it is important to make sure that there is not a postcode lottery between local authorities and that there is equality of service across borders?

**Alistair Strathern:** Absolutely. The new kinship care ambassador and the guidance for local authorities that was brought out earlier this year will be important in delivering that, as will making sure that local authorities are held to account for delivering the local offer for kinship carers. This is an incredibly important issue, and whether a kinship carer and a young person get the support they need cannot be left to the luck of a postcode.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Alistair Strathern:** I will give way to both my hon. Friends, then I will have to make some progress.

**Peter Swallow:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He makes a really important point about ending the postcode lottery. Does he agree that that extends to businesses and employers being more flexible when it comes to granting leave to kinship carers? Kinship carers often take on the responsibility at a moment of great crisis. It can be a really difficult moment, and we need to do more to ensure that they are supported to take the time off from work that they need to look after those in their care.

**Alistair Strathern:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who, with typically great foresight, has alluded to one of the points I hope to touch on later in my speech.

**Amanda Martin:** Does my hon. Friend agree that we must thank all kinship carers, in particular the 600 in my city, and that we must recognise that when children cannot be with their biological parents, it is often as a result of tragedy and trauma, yet kinship carers do not get the opportunity as often as adoptive parents and foster carers for training and preparation? That needs to be highlighted.

**Alistair Strathern:** I absolutely echo those sentiments. It cannot be right that young people who have gone through exactly the same level of trauma or difficulties early in their life can get very different levels of support depending on the statutory context in which they are looked after. We must consider that as part of the wider reforms to social care.

It would be fair to say that there is a consensus in the Chamber today that although there are exciting announcements coming from the Government on kinship care, there is a real desire to ensure that we do justice to kinship carers in thinking about how we can go further. I am really glad that in the Budget, the Government clearly set out the need to think about children's social care reform more widely. It has been kicked down the road for too long. As the independent review of children's social care rightly laid out, we are presiding over a system that is not delivering good outcomes for young people and their wider family network, at great cost to the taxpayer. That cannot be allowed to continue.

It is important to me and, I can see, to everyone in the Chamber today that kinship carers are a big part of how we put that right. We know that outcomes with kinship carers are better. We know that for every thousand people we place in kinship care, the taxpayer saves £40 million, and that that cohort, being better supported, will go on to earn up to £20 million more than if they had been placed in private social care. That is simple maths—a cold, hard, brutal underlining of the scale of the opportunity we are missing if we do not do right by kinship carers.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): The economic point that the hon. Gentleman makes is powerful. This is not just about the long-term savings he alluded to

from the improved outcomes for these children; there are short-term savings to paying kinship carers an allowance universally—not just in 10 pilots across the country—and extending employment leave through the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023. Will he join me in pushing his party's Front Benchers to be more ambitious? That will help the Chancellor find many of the savings she is looking for.

**Alistair Strathern:** I hope the hon. Lady knows that I will always be an ambitious advocate for kinship carers. I have met my match in the Minister, who is a very ambitious advocate for them too. I look forward to working with her and the Secretary of State, who I know has a real ambition for kinship carers and children's social care more generally, to ensure that we do right by those who have been failed all too often by the system we have inherited.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Alistair Strathern:** Let me make some progress, in order to ensure that I give the Minister time to respond.

I will briefly highlight three areas where we would welcome further consideration and action. The pilots are fantastic news, and if we have not yet settled on where they will be, I cannot recommend Hertfordshire and Central Bedfordshire councils more. I urge the Minister to ensure that there is no delay and that the support is brought forward as quickly as possible. While I recognise the value of a compelling evidence base in policymaking, there is a clear case that this financial support will make a meaningful difference to kinship carers and potentially help to relieve the impact of further cost burdens in the system right now.

As other Members have alluded to, far too many kinship carers and their families cannot access the therapeutic support their young people and wider family networks need to navigate moments of trauma as effectively as possible. I know that there have been moves to rename the adoption fund, which has had positive benefits in improving some kinship carers' access to it, but currently just one in seven of even those kinship carers who are eligible are benefiting from therapeutic support provided through that funding, and others are not eligible yet. Measures to widen access and put kinship carers on par with foster carers in other parts of the care system can only be welcomed.

I welcome the Government's ambition to look again at things like parental leave. We have seen real action from the Government already, in their expansion of workers' rights. It cannot be right that some of those who are least prepared to take on family responsibility, and have to do it at the shortest notice, in some cases with no planning at all, because of the very nature of the responsibility, receive no support at all. I urge the Minister to do everything she can to voice the need for consideration of kinship care leave as part of that wider allowance.

I am so excited to be part of a party that is taking this issue seriously and showing real leadership. I am looking forward to working with everyone in the Chamber to take forward our shared ambition to do right by kinship carers across the country, including those who have joined us here today. No one who meets a kinship carer or a young person in care can be under any illusion

about the urgent case for change. We need to put right the things that they are experiencing and do all we can to support their love and determination to ensure that no other young person has to go through the challenges that the care system is currently forcing on them.

I thank the Minister for listening so attentively and colleagues for intervening so forcefully. I apologise to those from whom I was not able to take interventions in the end. It is so nice to see such interest in this issue, and I very much look forward to working with hon. Members and the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on kinship care, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), in taking forward the exciting issues we have been discussing today.

4.15 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) on securing this important debate. He has a keen interest in supporting kinship carers, and it is great to hear his passion and advocacy for kinship families in his constituency. It was also great to hear the interventions by so many Members from across the Chamber, who, alongside those who were unable to intervene, are equally passionate about improving the situation for kinship carers. I assure them that I hear the strength of their arguments and their passion, and I will take that with me as I work in this space.

The Government's mission is to break down barriers to opportunity and give every child the best start in life, and that includes supporting the amazing role that kinship carers play. I thank all kinship carers for the excellent caring work that they do, and the love and compassion they show to the children and loved ones they look after.

**Grahame Morris:** I am grateful for the Government's emphasis and focus on kinship carers. We are all desperately awaiting the announcement of the 10 pilot areas, but does the Minister recognise that the trial alone offers little reassurance to people such as my constituent Elaine Duffy, who was working full time but had to go part time and withdraw her pension savings to adapt her home so that she could care for her three grandchildren? She still receives no state financial support, and she is looking for some reassurance from the new Government. Can the Minister offer any?

**Janet Daby:** I thank my hon. Friend for that example. If he will allow me to continue, I will address the inconsistencies across local authorities. We have heard about such real-life examples, and we recognise that the situation is not good enough. As I continue, I will explain how the new Government have already begun to address it.

I met some kinship carers during my first visit as a Minister, and it was clear to me that the challenges I witnessed years ago when I was a children and families social worker are still being felt today. That is shocking. I listened to the stories that hon. Members told, like the one that my hon. Friend just raised, and I was very troubled by them—how could I not be? However, we are in government; we want things to change, and change has begun. The evidence shows that children in kinship care often do better in school. They have better health outcomes and do better in later life, in terms of employment and their ability to socialise. Kinship carers

are to be thanked, applauded and celebrated for providing a safe and loving home for children who can no longer live with their parents, but are instead being cared for by family members or friends who love them.

**Sam Carling** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

**Janet Daby:** I will make some progress, but if I have time later, I will let my hon. Friend in.

The Government recognise the important role that kinship carers play. Our manifesto is committed to working with local government to support children in kinship care and kinship carers. We are already making progress, as we have heard. In the Budget, the Chancellor announced £40 million to trial a new financial allowance for kinship carers, equivalent to the allowance for foster carers. That will take place initially in up to 10 local authorities. I have already been lobbied on this, and I say again that we are looking at how it will be rolled out, but Members will need to be patient. We will get the information to them as soon as possible. I recognise the desire for this in local authorities.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Janet Daby:** I will make some progress, but again, I will give way later if I have time.

The investment is the single biggest made by any Government in kinship care to date. Our ambition is that all kinship carers will get the support they need to care for their children. It is important that we continue to build the evidence base to find out the benefit of financial support for kinship families. I have no doubt that kinship families will be able to tell me much about the benefits, but it is important that we go through the process.

Helping kinship carers with financial challenges is critical to giving children in care the opportunity to thrive. During Kinship Care Week in October, I was delighted to announce the appointment of the first ever national kinship care ambassador, Jahnine Davis, who will advocate for kinship children and their carers—she has already been to me to advocate for them. The ambassador will work directly with local authorities to improve services for kinship families and share best practice across areas.

My Department has also published new kinship care statutory guidance for local authorities to help them to apply a consistent approach. It sets out the vital support and services that local authorities should provide to kinship families. The guidance confirms the requirement for local authorities to publish their local offer in a clear and accessible way, so that more kinship families get the help they need.

On workplace entitlements for kinship carers, I have met many kinship families since I became the Children's Minister, and I recognise the challenges that many kinship carers face in continuing to work alongside taking in and raising a child. I am delighted that on 6 November, the Department for Education introduced kinship leave, offering a pay and leave entitlement to all eligible staff who become kinship carers. As the Department leading on support for kinship carers, we believe that we should be an exemplar employer offering a model for others to follow.



**Sam Carling:** In my North West Cambridgeshire constituency, we have a huge number of kinship families, and Peterborough city council is doing a lot of work around that. It has sent the Minister a letter, and I think it will follow that up with a business case next week. I will not ask for a commitment from her, but can she reassure me that that will be taken into consideration when deciding which local authorities will be included in the trial?

**Janet Daby:** There we are—another bit of lobbying. I recognise the work of local authorities and the letter; a process will be rolled out, and we will give everybody the opportunity to apply.

**Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Will the Minister consider the Isle of Wight as one of the 10 local authority areas to benefit from any Budget money? The Isle of Wight is an excellent place to trial such things.

**Janet Daby:** I will not repeat what I have said—it still stands.

**Melanie Onn:** I congratulate the Minister on securing the DFE as a kinship-friendly employer. There are other employers in the country, such as John Lewis, B&Q and Card Factory, that have done amazing things around kinship care leave. Is any consideration being given to bringing some of those best practice examples together, so that we could roll out, through our Government structures, support to employers to become kinship-friendly?

**Janet Daby:** My hon. Friend makes a significant point. There is lots more that needs to be done in this space, and her point demonstrates that much more work is needed.

**Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way and for her leadership on this really important issue; I know she cares a lot about it. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) on securing the debate, and I would like to say a huge thank you to the brilliant kinship carers here today and across the country for the amazing work they do, as the silent, often unheard, majority of the children's social care system.

The previous Government had the right prescription but probably the wrong dose, as I have said on a number of occasions. I welcome the fact that the Government have announced the next wave of funding for kinship care and, in the Budget, an additional £250 million in 2025-26 for reforming children's social care, with a major commitment at the spending review to look at the whole system. I congratulate the Minister on securing that.

I would like to reiterate three quick and simple points. I ask the Minister to find a way to secure parental leave for all kinship carers; to ensure that we find a way of helping local authorities to legally back family-led plans where they are an alternative to care; and to follow guidance that the Department for Education has published through Foundations, which recommends, based on evidence, that financially backing kinship carers as an alternative to foster care works.

**Janet Daby:** I thank my hon. Friend for his significant work and knowledge in this area, which he keenly demonstrates, and for his many significant points, which we will continue to consider.

**Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

**Janet Daby:** I am afraid that I need to make some progress.

I am pleased to confirm that the Government are supporting the delivery of 140 peer support groups across England. That is a vital service, giving kinship carers the opportunity to come together. It will provide peer-to-peer support, as well as offering them the opportunity to socialise with and meet other kinship carers, which will be a huge benefit. Alongside that, we are delivering a package of training and support for all kinship carers across England. Both those services provide much-needed additional support and offer guidance for kinship carers, because we recognise the early-years trauma and the other experiences of the children that they care for. They need support to enable them to do their best by the children they care for and love.

We are focused on improving support for children in kinship care. The role of the virtual school heads has been expanded and now includes championing the education, attendance and attainment of children in kinship care, ensuring that more children in kinship care receive the help they need to thrive at school. The renaming of the adoption and special guardianship support fund will rightly ensure that families are aware of the support to which they are entitled. It will incentivise local authorities and regional adoption agencies to make applications on behalf of kinship carers in need of therapeutic support, to ensure that those who can access the fund do so.

Keeping children safe is a key priority of the Government. In addition to our £44 million investment to support children in kinship care and foster care, £1.3 billion of new grant funding was announced for local government to deliver core services, of which £600 million is for social care, including children's social care. I mention that to highlight some of the other areas to which the Government are entirely committed.

I will talk briefly about national kinship pay and leave. Kinship carers will benefit from additional support and flexibility from their employers to help them to balance work with providing the best possible care to the children they love. The Department for Education has published guidance for employers that sets out the best practice for supporting kinship carers at work, including how they can adapt internal policies, signpost existing entitlements and create a culture of support to best meet the needs of kinship carers.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin for raising this extremely important debate. I also thank those who have contributed, raising the profile of better support for kinship carers. That is a key priority for me and the Government. We want to continue to build on the great progress that we have begun and to do much more in this space.

*Question put and agreed to.*

**Mark Pritchard (in the Chair):** I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and I thank the Minister for speaking in back-to-back debates—absolutely fantastic. We move on to the next debate.

## Family and Work Visas

4.30 pm

**Claire Hanna** (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered eligibility for family and work visas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and to have the opportunity to highlight the impact of some changes introduced earlier this year by the previous Government, and how they are landing with public services and the economy in Northern Ireland. As with any set of rules, I appreciate that there will be winners and losers, but these changes have had a negative impact in many areas, and it is important to ensure that the specific consequences for our region are factored into the current review. Flexibility in understanding regional differences is important to ensure that we build a system that allows businesses to grow and wages to rise, while hopefully the Stormont Executive and the UK Government's missions get a grip on our skills shortages.

Let me say from the outset that I appreciate that for many the issue of immigration is vexed and politically contested—certainly here—and I do not propose that we spend this hour talking about it in generalities. For what it is worth, I will say that the Social Democratic and Labour party, which I represent, is internationalist, pro-worker and pragmatic, and we want to see a fair immigration system that enriches our society and economy and allows talented people to come here and build a life, as many Irish people have done around the world for many generations.

We also appreciate that people see challenges for infrastructure and services—housing shortages are often cited—but we contend that the problem is that the proven value and economic impact of overseas workers in the UK economy has not in the past been properly directed and spent in health, housing and transport. Overall, the statistics bear out the fact that this aspect of immigration has washed its own face economically, and we are quite determined that decent and essential workers do not carry the can of years of failure to invest those gains properly. It is also a fact that our economic reliance on immigration is in part a consequence of inadequate skills investment, and I firmly support the aim of training and properly rewarding a local workforce. However, the rules and changes that will hopefully come have to deal with the economy that we have, not just the economy that we want to create.

Although the scope and parameters of immigration are a legitimate subject of debate, and I respect the right of any Government to devise policy, the current framework is detrimental to our local economy and services. I will focus specifically on the five-point plan that the right hon. Member for Braintree (Mr Cleverly) announced in December 2023, which came into effect earlier this year, in the hope that the Government will reform aspects of the changes. Like many, I believe that those changes were electorally motivated; they were a last roll of the dice for a Government on their way out—from the minds who brought us the Rwanda scheme and other things—and they did not necessarily fit in with economic needs. The changes are: the prohibition on dependants of social care workers; the increase in the baseline

minimum salary for a skilled worker visa; the shortening of the list of eligible roles on the immigration salary list; the increase in the threshold for a partner visa to £29,000, with proposals to increase that further next year; and the changes to the graduate visa, which the Migration Advisory Committee found no significant abuse of and recommended maintaining.

I will briefly set the context of the Northern Ireland economy. Overall, wages are lower in Northern Ireland, with a median full-time average of around £32,900 versus about £35,000 for the UK generally. From the get-go, that differential impacts businesses in different ways. We, of course, share a land border with the rest of Ireland, and while Brexit has made labour mobility more complicated than it was, there is a lot of such movement, with thousands of people crossing the border for work every day. That means that there is competition for talent.

With an open and dynamic economy, the Republic of Ireland has consistently invested in skills and education, even through the crash years, and created real opportunities to attract talent. That has not been the case in the north. By comparison, many northern businesses struggle—as, increasingly, do public services, with growing numbers of healthcare workers fleeing our truly broken system for the opportunity to work down south with better standards of care and better rates of pay.

Sadly, one of Northern Ireland's top exports continues to be our young people. We invest hundreds of thousands of pounds in their primary and post-primary education, with many then feeling the need to move to Britain or to the Republic in search of university places, which we artificially cap, better career opportunities, or—for many—a more stable and tolerant society. That is the real immigration problem that Northern Ireland needs to grapple with. I appreciate that not all of that is within the Minister's remit, but it was important for me to set out the environment in which local Northern Irish businesses are operating, and therefore the context of the further squeezes that the visa changes are applying.

The changes were not designed to support our economy or public services, and the negative impact is felt both economically and in terms of the myths they propagate. Just last week, a small child in my constituency was injured by broken glass caused by masonry being thrown through the window of their family home, which they share with a health worker parent. That was due to race hate, which reached a crescendo in many places, including my constituency, in August; that was in very large part due to hype coming from the media and at times from this Parliament.

The parent of that child is one of 12,000 immigrant workers in the Northern Ireland health and social care system—and thank God for them. Many are nurses, doctors and social care workers. The average wage for a care worker is £11.58 per hour. That is pennies above the minimum wage, lower than many retail or hospitality jobs, and the care sector understandably has a higher turnover. With tens of thousands of vacancies in that sector across the UK, it seemed bizarre that the Government made it even less attractive by legislating to separate workers from their families should they come from overseas. The general secretary of Unison put it well when she said that the Government were

“playing roulette with essential services just to placate its backbenchers”.

[Claire Hanna]

Far from being a concern for just the public sector, these changes have been raised with me by numerous individual businesses and representatives of sectors including manufacturing, hospitality, transport, fishing and parts of agriculture, some of which, it is fair to say, are dominated by entry-level and casual work. I support all the efforts to organise and support workers within those sectors.

One sector that has been strangled by lack of access to workers—exacerbated by these changes—is the mushroom industry in Northern Ireland. Mushroom workers are still limited to seasonal agricultural worker visas, which restrict workers who come through that route to a six-month stay. But with a training window of several months to get to the required levels of skill and productivity, the industry does not feel that that scheme meets the needs of a year-round crop. Those challenges are exacerbated by the proximity of the industry to the border, and the night and day difference between how farms in the south—

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): The hon. Lady is highlighting some of the issues with the seasonal agricultural worker scheme. Does she agree that one of the challenges of the scheme, in recent years and going forward, is that it is being extended on only an annual basis? If we want farmers to invest in technology and equipment, we need to give them a proper window to do so.

**Claire Hanna:** Absolutely, and that reflects the feedback I have received from the people who are trying to increase productivity and modernise. Such arbitrary frameworks do not help.

As I have said, the challenges for northern mushroom farms are exacerbated by the differential in investment in similar farming businesses in the south, where a bespoke visa is available for the mushroom sector that permits workers from across the globe to remain for two years. Given those additional subsidies and things like energy costs—it is a high-energy business—how can we expect to achieve the goal that we all share of locally grown food with a low-carbon footprint and profitability? A key aspect of supporting a thriving industry lies in the Government's hands, and they must ensure that it has access to labour.

Fishing is similarly impacted. My colleague and constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), will touch on the plight of the fishing sector. We worked together consistently on this issue under the previous mandate, as it affects a lot of rural and coastal communities, which depend very much on fishing. The recent paper from the sectoral body, Seafish, assessed the impact of the skilled worker visa changes, and gave a fairly comprehensive breakdown of reliance on overseas crews, along with the sector's operating losses and reduced profits, which suggests that there are only a few months of viability for a lot of those vessels.

It is not just the food supply that is at risk but infrastructure. Ferries are essential trade routes, as well as moving tens of thousands of people between our islands weekly. Since Brexit, non-national seafarers have no automatic right to work on GB-NI routes, which has impacted companies like Stena Line, which operates

crucial routes into Belfast and Warrenpoint. It has augmented its UK and Irish crews using frontier working permits, but those are not being issued any more, which poses a serious risk to service levels. Those seafaring jobs are highly skilled and well remunerated, but the workforce are traditionally global and there has been less of a defined merchant navy pipeline in recent years. This is another industry that has a solution ready to go, and it suggests—similar to the 2022 offshore well boat workers—a targeted and potentially even timebound ferry worker concession that could avert disruption to the passenger and trade lifeline, with almost no cost or impact on the taxpayer, which would buy the industry time to adjust to all the post-Brexit frameworks and skills deficits.

I will turn briefly to the nearly 50% uplift in the skilled worker visa salary. Silotank is a Belfast-based manufacturing business that, among other things, is helping Northern Ireland Water to update its antiquated infrastructure safely and sustainably. Across Northern Ireland, development has come to a halt. Thousands of houses in planning have been delayed for the want of modern drainage. That business is investing heavily in decarbonising its products, with alternative energy sources to its west Belfast plant, but growth is limited by a lack of access to qualified technicians, with no adequate engineering pipeline in Northern Ireland.

Manufacturing NI, the sectoral body, has highlighted a perfect storm for its members: rapid expansion in manufacturing is one of our success stories, I am pleased to say, but we are not making it easy for the industry in many ways, as that is accompanied by a low skill pool and low net migration. Manufacturing NI says that some 80% of its members have low confidence in their ability to fill skilled roles. We lament our sluggish productivity, but it is hard to invest in an economy with labour shortages. The organisation advocates resurrecting a sector-based scheme from the last time Labour was in government, as that would allow temporary 12-month opportunities with a plausible £26,200 minimum salary.

Another recent change was the rise in the minimum salary for sponsoring a spouse or partner, which has gone up to £29,000 and is set to increase. The Migration Observatory called that the most restrictive family reunion policy of any high-income country, citing the existence of thousands of Skype families who are unable to be together because of these rules.

Before the changes, family reunion accounted for some 60,000 people. By definition, those people were joining established and earning family units. Having such a high threshold—if it continues to go up, it will be much higher than average earnings—is forcing many people to choose between their families and their career, which will have a disproportionate impact on women and create an environment in which only the wealthy can choose who they fall in love with.

Those examples across sectors are the top-line problems. There are fixes and willing partners in industry, including some low-hanging administrative fixes as the Government work through new policies. Unlike the current policies, however, those new policies need to be based in the economic reality of the world we live in, as well as the environment in which businesses are operating in Northern Ireland, which is qualitatively different to England in many ways.



Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry's latest quarterly economic survey confirms that access to skills is a challenge for local businesses across sectors, with three quarters reporting difficulty recruiting and nearly 40% highlighting a negative impact from the changes. Workers face barriers to sustaining and progressing in their employment, and sometimes face less-than-decent treatment at work. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland highlights that migrant workers are over-represented in low-paid jobs, certainly in their early years. Too much change and a tightening of the rules has created uncertainty, which is a deterrent for some employers who are unsure of the legal framework, and real difficulties for many in changing jobs.

On a separate issue—before I finish and while I have the opportunity—the reform of work-related visas should finally address the unreasonable delay in the right to work for those trapped in a chaotic asylum system. I appreciate that that is a different matter entirely, but we know that it delays integration, increases the cost to the public purse of supporting those people in that time, deprives that person of the dignity of work, and deprives our economy of often incredibly skilled and entrepreneurial people, whom we could absolutely do with.

That reform is in line with the Migration Advisory Committee's recommendation. It would help to address labour market gaps and would surely give people the right start to a needed new life. I thank you, Mr Pritchard, and the Minister for facilitating this debate, which is brought in the spirit of constructive feedback and hopefully fairer and more pragmatic rules in future.

4.47 pm

**Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) on securing this debate. She spoke very eloquently and with a lot of knowledge and passion, as well as a real grasp of the issues at hand. I thank her for the way in which she introduced the topic.

The problem affects local families not just in Northern Ireland but right across the UK. In my constituency of Ilford South, immigration and visa issues are among the most common that people raise with me, and my office has had over 15 cases this week. As the hon. Member said, it is having an impact on our economy and the fabric of our society, and it is tearing families apart.

People choose to make the United Kingdom home for many reasons, often due to close family ties, historical links and pressing needs, and of course for a better way of life, to which I can attest—my family came here 50-odd years ago for a better life. I would like to think that we have contributed to society here. Unfortunately, as has been highlighted, many people face a needlessly hostile system that is rigged with barriers, which in the worst cases quite literally tear families apart.

I will share the story of a family in Ilford South. My constituent, Dr Siddiqui, is a fully qualified medical doctor, who not only had cared for people in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia but had brought his talents and much-needed skills here to the UK. This chap spent his whole life helping people, but he was put in an impossible situation by a system that is rigged against some of the talent that we are trying to attract. Dr Siddiqui's wife, who is also a fully qualified doctor, had to make the

heartbreaking decision to leave her husband in the UK to look after their severely disabled daughter because the daughter's visa was turned down.

We were at risk of losing two fully qualified medical doctors. Thankfully, following an intervention, the Home Office reviewed the decision and the Siddiqui family were reunited in Ilford South, but not before they had endured incredible hardship trying to work through an unknown, often challenging and entirely unnecessary system.

The Siddiqui family's story thankfully has a happy ending, but sadly many other families have not been so fortunate and remain separated by the complicated and inaccessible visa system. If Dr Siddiqui had been a social worker—another essential and desperately needed profession—neither his wife nor his disabled daughter would have been eligible to join him here in the UK, and we need to look at how we can change that system. We must always remember that, with the changes to the eligibility criteria, there are significant human costs, as well as the economic loss to this great nation. We risk the economic growth of our country, which is desperately needed, in addition to the very fabric of our society, which will be much poorer if we do not address the issues raised by the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down.

**Mark Pritchard (in the Chair):** I remind hon. Members that this is a 60-minute debate. There is no formal time limit right now, but I encourage everybody to stick to around four minutes.

4.52 pm

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) on securing this important debate.

I am proud to represent as part of my constituency the diverse town of Keighley, where a third of residents are of Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage. A high volume of the constituency casework that comes into my office is related to visas or immigration, and that is what my contribution will focus on, because what is most important to me and, indeed, my constituents is that the system is fair. Recently, my office has seen a rise in the use of an immigration loophole through spouse visas that not only makes a mockery of the proper procedure for obtaining indefinite leave to remain, but puts an additional cost on the taxpayer. I will explore some of the challenges that I am seeing in my casework.

Under the standard procedure, individuals brought to the UK on a spouse visa are granted an initial 2.5 years' right to remain. The spouse must then apply and pay for that to be extended for a further 2.5 years. Assuming the relationship does not break down in that period, the individual may then apply for settled status, again at their own cost, which we would all agree is appropriate. But if the relationship breaks down, the visa is void and the individual returns to their country of origin.

If the spouse reports that they have experienced domestic abuse by their British partner, however, not only are they allowed to seek settled status immediately, but the costs are borne by the British taxpayer for the

[Robbie Moore]

process. Let me quickly say that I am in no way suggesting that honest claimants of domestic abuse should be ignored by the authorities or should not be assisted by the police. Of course, anyone found to have perpetrated domestic abuse should feel the full force of the law, and victims should receive as much support as necessary. Of the nine cases brought to my office in recent months where domestic abuse had been reported, however, none has received any further action by the police.

I will give an example from one mother whose son's spouse came across to reside with them. A complaint of domestic abuse was made against not only the son, but the wider family. The police explored it, and it resulted in them taking no further action, but it caused a huge amount of stress for the family.

Indeed, some claims of domestic abuse are now being made as early as a few weeks into the claimants' arrival in the UK, both by men and women. I fear that even in loving relationships, a claim of domestic abuse is being used by certain individuals to accelerate getting settled status or to avoid the costs that must be paid to apply for settled status or for visa extension. That is wrong, not only for my constituents who go through the system properly and fairly, but for the wider UK taxpayer, who is funding a system that encourages the cheapening of the experience of genuine domestic abuse cases that are pursued by the police and authorities. It is a loophole that exists to try to enable people to save money.

In my view, if a relationship is terminated on the grounds of domestic abuse, the spouse should be returned to their country of origin once the police have carried out sufficient investigation or any immediate safety concerns have been addressed. The closing of the loophole has wide-ranging support across my constituency, including in the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. We all fear that the system, which most people use honestly, is being abused by a small minority. I bring that issue to the Minister's attention, as it has been raised by many of my constituents, and I hope that she will address it in her closing remarks.

4.56 pm

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) on securing this important debate. I will limit my remarks to a few key points.

I argue that the current system for family work visas is arbitrary and does not work for anybody. We have shortages in hospitality, care work, medicine and, indeed, dentistry, as I discussed with the Scottish Government this morning—to name just a few areas. I understand that dealing with the domestic skills gap is a priority, but I cannot turn around to my local businesses struggling to keep a full rota, or to the families on a waiting list for social care, and tell them that they just need to wait.

I, too, was contacted by constituents distressed at the increase in the earnings threshold for family visas when it was introduced earlier this year. One constituent wrote to say that his son effectively had to emigrate to live with his partner elsewhere, because as recent graduates they would not be meeting the threshold for years. That is the brain drain playing out right in front of us.

I will make some points in relation to family reunion visas. I would be grateful if the Minister could look into the long delayed application of my constituent, who was granted asylum in March this year and immediately in April applied for his wife and two children to join him. He has not seen them for years and misses them, but he is also deeply worried for their safety. My team first contacted the Home Office about it in August and we were advised that the 24-week turnaround time meant that my constituent could expect a response in October. The Minister can observe that we are now well into November; if I pass on the details of the case, will she look at what can be done to expedite it and ensure that my constituent's family can be brought back together?

My second point on family reunion is about stage 2 of pathway 1 of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. As the Minister will know, it opened in the summer after much delay, and was welcomed and appreciated by Afghans, but there are still issues with it that I hope the Minister can respond to today, or return to her Department and write to me later about. That particular route refers to the separated family members of those who were evacuated under stage 1 of the pathway: those who were identified for evacuation from Afghanistan immediately prior to and following the fall of Kabul.

The first issue is the time limit. Although Afghans were identified for evacuation in a relatively short period, between 13 and 28 August, many were unable to access evacuation flights at that time. We can all remember—certainly those of us who were in the House, and even those who were not—the chaos unfolding as the Taliban came closer and closer to the airport. It took until March the following year for all those identified for evacuation to reach the UK. The ability for them to be reunited with their family, however, is based on being evacuated in that limited August period, not just identified for evacuation. I assume that it must be an oversight to leave families out of the scheme for those people who happened to come a few days, weeks or months later through no fault of their own.

My second question for the Minister is whether she will look into the take-up of the scheme. The application window was open for only a short time—from 30 July to 30 October. The forms are lengthy and the evidence required is, rightly, substantial. Has support been provided to Afghans here and families elsewhere? How is the Home Office responding when families struggle to provide the necessary documentation? That is particularly difficult for families who have fled to Pakistan and may not have access to documentation such as bank statements, marriage certificates and medical records. Will the Home Office consider reopening the application window if it comes to light that the process has not worked, and that families, many of whom served and worked with the UK when we were in Afghanistan, remain separated due to the short timeframe and difficulties in meeting those requirements?

This debate is wide. It is about many things, many people and many places, but at its heart is whether the Home Office is set up to make the processes involved transparent, efficient and effective.

5 pm

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your guidance, Mr Pritchard. I give my serious thanks to the hon. Member for Belfast

South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for bringing an important issue to this place. Britain should control our borders and regulate migration effectively, and we should do it humanely and in our own interests, yet so often we do not do that at all. We obsess about the shallow politics of it all and we ignore practicalities for the people involved and for businesses in Britain and the wider economy.

There are two areas to cover. The first is family visas and the minimum income requirement. I ask the Minister to ensure that the driving principle is about what people need to earn in order to support a family, not a ham-fisted way of limiting numbers. The current income floor is £29,000—up from £18,600 under the Conservatives. The plan to take it to £38,700 will absolutely divide families. I ask the Minister to consider the impact upon child poverty, child development and family welfare. Will she assess the impact of splitting up children from one or both of their parents, which has happened in my constituency? I have been talking to constituents near Grange-over-Sands recently. I also spoke to a gentleman in Oxenholme, and he and his wife would not qualify under the rules even as they are. Will the Minister look carefully at the policy and ensure that it does not destroy families by splitting children from their parents, or parents from one another? That would be a deeply unpleasant thing for this Government to do, the scheme having been designed by the previous Government.

Because of time, I will move on to skilled work visas. The threshold is moot and is being discussed. In a letter to me just a few days ago, the Minister said:

“Raising the salary criteria is designed to ensure that resident workers’ wages cannot be undercut and ensures that the Skilled Worker route is not used as a source of low-cost labour.”

Yes, I completely agree, but will she accept that things are different in some parts of our country? I will give a quick run-through. The Lake district is the most populated national park in the country. Some 80% of the working-age population in the lakes already work in hospitality and tourism. There is no reservoir of talent for us to delve into. What we desperately need to do is control the excessive numbers of second homes and holiday lets, and build genuinely affordable homes for local people so that we can build our workforce that way. We also need to upskill our young people and stop them leaving our communities, so that they can remain and contribute to the workforce.

There is no doubt whatever that a smallish population, serving the biggest visitor destination in the country outside London, will always need to import labour, so we desperately need consideration. The chief of Cumbria Tourism, which serves our community so well and represents businesses right across our area, said:

“Without legal migration Cumbria (in particular central Lakes) will suffer in terms of labour shortages. We don’t have enough chefs, we don’t have enough experienced Managers and we don’t have enough people in customer service roles. All roles that we didn’t struggle to fill when...overseas workers were able to take up jobs more freely.”

To finish, I will give a picture of what this issue means on a macro level for our economy. Some 66% of hospitality and tourism businesses in the lakes and dales are operating below capacity because they do not have enough staff. It is good to control our borders, but let us do so humanely. Let us control our borders in a way that works for Britain, rather than damaging our economy.

5.4 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for securing the debate. She and I may have some constitutional and political differences, but this is a unifying issue for us both and for the community that we represent.

Connectivity across the UK is a subject that I have raised on multiple occasions over the past number of weeks, and the reason is clear: the lifeblood of Northern Ireland is our ability to trade skills and products with the mainland UK on a reciprocal basis. The ferry system is as vital to that ability as oxygen is to the very lungs with which we breathe in this Chamber. The current situation is concerning. It needs not simply a debate in this place, but action by the Government. We very much look to the Minister for assurance that the needs are heard and will receive attention and action.

Ferry routes across the Irish sea are vital to national infrastructure. They ensure that trade, tourism and essential services flow; without them, Northern Ireland cannot exist in this modern world. We need that movement, as the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down outlined. The insidious Northern Ireland protocol, with its difficulties for the haulage companies and delays in transport, has highlighted the nature of Northern Ireland and shown that, within days of delayed shipping, shelves were empty. That is a fact of where we are. Our trade is important, and Stena Line in particular, which carries the bulk of trade, economy and tourism across the water, is very important. Clearly, the ferry routes must be protected and prioritised as vital infrastructure.

I therefore ask for a commitment by the Government, and the Minister in particular, to engage with Stena and its parent company to find a solution, perhaps using—I offer this as a solution—the offshore well boat concession as a template to solve the problem. There has been an understandable focus on the politics and the paperwork of the Windsor framework, but an offshoot of that has been that insufficient thought has gone into ensuring that we have the people with the necessary skills on the seafaring routes to ensure that there is no disruption to trade across the Irish sea. Their vital role must be protected. If the ferry routes are not able to operate in the future because we do not have qualified seafarers, that could lead to empty shop shelves, lack of certain medical supplies and certain difficulties for my constituents.

The hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down mentioned the fishermen. My understanding is that last week, the Government made concessions for horticulture and farming, including for those in mushrooms, vegetables and potatoes; but they have not made those concessions for the fishermen, although they could have done. Fishermen’s work is not only skilled but seasonal.

Last Saturday I was in the advice centre at Portavogie. Fishermen came to see me and underlined the issues clearly: they need a seasonal work system, so that they can bring people in for eight or nine months a year. Last week, the fish producer organisations met the Minister of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—a very constructive meeting—and I spoke to him before a debate. The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs was hoping to speak to the Minister who is in her place today. I suggest that more such



[Jim Shannon]

contacts should be made, because I believe there will be a way forward. I make a plea for some help for the fishing sector.

The hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down and I did not agree on Brexit—I just say such things—and we did not agree on the protocol or on many other Northern Ireland issues, but I can tell hon. Members this: the visa programme is a clear uniting issue. That so often happens—that there are things that bring us together. I like to focus on the things that bring us together, and the hon. Lady likes to do so as well. We need those crews to operate, and they must be able to continue as they are, or Northern Ireland might well come to a standstill.

I look to the Minister again for consideration and action. I am happy, if necessary, to facilitate a meeting between the fishermen, Stena Line, the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down and me to make that happen.

**Mark Pritchard (in the Chair):** We now come to the Front Benchers—five minutes each for the two in opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister.

5.9 pm

**Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD):** It is a pleasure to participate with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I offer many congratulations to the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) on securing this important debate.

If I am to make only one point today, it is that our visa system is broken. It is not fair, it is not fit for purpose and it is costing us—our economy, our communities and, most importantly, our people. The Liberal Democrats want to see a system that is fair, practical and humane, and one that values families, recognises economic realities and ensures that our workforce can meet the needs of the country. The previous Conservative Government imposed an arbitrary salary threshold—it has been mentioned by others—of £38,700 for skilled work visas. So far, the incoming Labour Government have followed their lead. The threshold does not work. It is just a number, and it is detached from the realities of the UK's labour market.

Across industries like hospitality and social care, which are absolutely vital to our society and economy, salaries are often below that threshold. By setting an inflexible limit, we are denying skilled workers the opportunity to contribute to our communities and leaving critical roles unfilled. The threshold does not just hurt workers; it hurts us all. When we drive qualified people away, we end up short-staffed in our NHS, schools and care homes. Every unfilled position means a longer wait in A&E, a larger school class or a care home resident left without the help they need.

That is why we Liberal Democrats are calling for a flexible, merit-based system for work visas. Such a system would allow us to work closely with each sector, responding to its unique needs and ensuring that skilled individuals who meet those needs can come to the UK. We should be assessing visa applicants based on their skills, qualifications and the demand for their expertise, not on an arbitrary figure forced to fit across all industries.

This is just a piece of a larger puzzle, and it must go hand in hand with a long-term workforce strategy. If we want to tackle labour shortages and skills gaps in a sustainable way, we must invest in developing our own talent for high-demand sectors. The previous Government failed to prioritise that, and I urge the current Labour Government to turn this plan into a reality. We have also urged the Government to move control over work visas and policies for international students out of the Home Office, which has repeatedly shown its lack of understanding of the needs of employers and universities. These issues should be put where they belong—in the Departments that understand their value.

Moving on to family visas, the Conservatives' decision to increase the minimum income threshold has left many families in a state of deep uncertainty, wondering whether they will be split apart simply because a loved one's income does not meet an arbitrary requirement. This is not just a policy failure; it is a failure of compassion. The Liberal Democrats believe that no family should be torn apart by these cruel thresholds. Family life should not be a privilege for the well-off; it is a basic human right. We have therefore called for an immediate reversal of these unfair increases to the income threshold. Families deserve clarity and stability, and we urge the Government to act swiftly to address the issue.

In short, the Liberal Democrats are clear that we can and should have a fair, compassionate visa system that works for UK people and people wanting to come here to contribute—not against them. The time has come to move beyond arbitrary numbers and red tape. We should build a system that is rational, humane and responsive to the needs of our society. A merit-based approach to work visas, aligned with a practical workforce strategy, will help us attract and retain the talent we need. A fair policy on family visas will keep families together, relieving them of unnecessary anxiety and hardship. I urge the Minister and the Government to abandon many of the policies of the past and support a vision of the UK that values family, fairness and economic common sense.

5.13 pm

**Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, particularly in my first response to a debate in my new position. I know that the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) has been campaigning on this issue for some time. Although we may not agree on it, I applaud her for securing this debate.

Today we have heard much from hon. Members about the impact of eligibility criteria. Although we will not always agree, some points were well made. Ultimately, I believe that there is broad agreement across the House, and definitely across the country, that we need a system that prioritises skills and talent. People are happy to see migration that helps our economy grow and supports our NHS, while encouraging investment in and protecting our resident workforce. That is why we now have the highest number of nurses ever, and we were able to increase the number of GP appointments from 2019 to 2023 by 50 million.

We want a system that rewards those who come to the UK and contribute, while ensuring that those who already live here are not negatively impacted. What is paramount is that people feel the system is fair. We must

be comfortable with migration policies on visa eligibility that provide robust controls to limit migration and prioritise the economic welfare of the UK. To achieve that, we previously took a number of steps to strengthen the rules. The success of those measures has already been demonstrated: we have seen decreases in applications, with 15,200 applications recorded between April and September 2024 following our changes, which was a reduction of 83% compared with the six months before.

Applications for dependants are also down considerably. In 2023, we got to the point where there were six dependants for every one worker seeking to come to the UK. This dramatic drop underscores the need to adapt our eligibility criteria to provide robust rules and prevent misuse of the system. The significant numbers that we saw in the past were excessive, and we had to take action to get them down. The new Government have maintained our changes to the system, and clearly we agree that the policy is working—or, perhaps, the Minister will announce that she is changing the strategy today. However, I ask her for her assessment of the reduced numbers. Will the implications of the reduction be taken into account when evaluating other visa categories?

Although it is still in the early stages of analysing the data, the Migration Advisory Committee has noted that initial indications suggest that changes to the student route will also impact on total numbers. The Government have commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to review the financial requirements in the family member immigration rules and said that no further changes will be made until the advisory review is complete. Although I have full confidence in the ability of the committee to deliver a thorough review, the Government must review the urgency with which they are acting; delays are not in the best interests of the system. Past measures have shown that decisive action can deliver a significant impact on overall levels of migration. We must ensure that we maintain a fair system and reduce migration where it is too high. I therefore ask the Minister if there is a clear timetable for the review. Will she assure the House that the Government will act swiftly to implement all and any recommendations from the committee?

Although I do not want to pre-empt the remarks of the Minister, I expect that she may allude to the levels of legal migration during the tenure of the previous Government. We have been clear that we agree those numbers were too high, which is why we implemented the significant change to visa rules, and we will work co-operatively across the House with the Government on further measures in this Parliament. The changes that we made should be seen not as an end point, but as part of a longer process to reduce migration to ensure that the public have confidence that our immigration system is being managed effectively. If the process continues to reduce numbers and create a fairer, more effective system, it will have our support. Will the Minister outline if the Government are planning any further changes to our legal migration framework in the next year in either data collection or visa eligibility?

As I said at the start of the debate, legal migration bringing in skills to key sectors is not an issue. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) and I would be the first to back calls for more agricultural workers to deliver the right work that we need. When I was in central Asia, I saw for myself the geopolitical benefits of bringing in people

for seasonal work. In central Asia, they normally have a return rate of about 99%. They want to come, do the work and return home, and our farmers and agricultural industries want to receive their support. However, migration must be managed in a way that protects the interests of the UK and our residents, and that includes reducing the total number of migrants, which we accept has been too high in recent years.

The reforms made by the Conservatives in the last Parliament have borne fruit and been maintained by Labour. I hope that the Minister will build on them and ensure that our system is as robust and fair as possible.

5.18 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for securing this debate. There has been thoughtful consideration of the issues by Members from across the House. I also acknowledge what the hon. Lady did and how she helped her community in August, in those very difficult circumstances. I am grateful to her and to all who have contributed. I will seek to address all the points raised, but I hope that Members will understand that that may be difficult in the time that I have. I will certainly come back in writing if there are outstanding points.

I will deal briefly with a few of the points raised before I go into more detail in my remarks on the contribution of the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down. Some of the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) were reflected by others in terms of the quality of caseworking and the service received. As Members of Parliament, we have all experienced those cases and circumstances, so I am glad that the issue he raised has been resolved. Where there are any issues or concerns about whether the system is being fair and how cases are being dealt with, please write to me on those matters. We will certainly look at them in a way that also enables us to learn from what could be happening better and implement those systems.

The point about public confidence raised by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) about immigration is important, but it comes back to the point raised more broadly about having an immigration system that is fair, humane, transparent and compliant with the law, including international law. I am keen to make the broader point that it is important that we continue to have dialogue across the House on matters such as immigration, which need and want a lot of cross-party support to deal with the challenges. That is in the interest of our economy and of fairness, but is also important for our security, so we need to have open and transparent debate on such matters and take the input from colleagues across the House.

I will come back to other points that have been raised during the debate, but on net migration and some of the changes being made, I want to make it clear that the Government recognise and value the contribution of workers from overseas to our economy and our public services, including our NHS, and they would not function without them. The point has been made, and we are

[Seema Malhotra]

very clear, that the immigration system needs to be properly managed and controlled—and that is important for public confidence too.

We are clear that net migration and reliance on overseas recruitment need to come down, and in addition to bringing down levels of overall net migration, our approach will also help ensure that there are better and higher-paid jobs for those who are already resident in the UK. In April 2024, the previous Government introduced a package of changes aimed at reducing overall levels of net migration and tackling abuse in the social care sector. Those changes included requiring any employer in England wishing to recruit international care workers or senior care workers to be registered with the Care Quality Commission and to carry out regulated activity. They also included removing the ability for care workers and senior workers to apply with dependents. The package also replaced the previous shortage occupation list with the immigration salary list.

The Home Secretary confirmed in July that the Government are retaining those changes. We acknowledge the concerns raised and welcome debates such as this one. I also think it is important, in response to some of the issues, that we lay out where we are going further and taking a different approach. We have established a new framework that will link the Migration Advisory Committee's work with the newly formed Skills England and skills bodies across the UK, as well as the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council and the Department for Work and Pensions, to support a more coherent approach to migration, skills and labour market issues.

I will make a broad point on the issue raised about particular routes and the appendix for domestic abuse. It is extremely important for Members across the House to ensure that we are tackling abuse on any routes. On what is an important safeguard in the system, we are clear that there has to be a high threshold of evidence and that we take steps to tackle abuse wherever we detect that and wherever that occurs. That is extremely important and a clear approach across the Home Office.

On salary requirements, for too long, immigration has been used as an alternative to tackling skills shortages and labour market issues in the UK. The salary requirements that were raised in the spring related to the median salary for occupations, ensuring people continue to be paid at a higher rate than many in the occupation. That, along with the immigration skills charge, are designed to ensure that employers look first at the resident labour market before looking at employing an international worker.

Points about the threshold were raised, and I will come back on a couple of points. For those new to the route since 4 April 2024, who must be paid £38,700 per year or the going rate for their occupation—whichever is higher—the salary floor can be reduced to just over £30,000, depending on tradeable points such as discounts for new entrants. There is some flexibility. Indeed, for those extending visas in this route or working in healthcare or education, who must be paid £29,000 per year or the going rate for their occupation, again, the salary floor can be lowered for roles on the immigration salary list. Those roles in healthcare and education are based on nationally set pay scales or by using tradeable points.

It is important to say that immigration remains a reserved matter, and we will consider the needs of the UK as a whole. Applying different immigration rules to different parts of the UK can complicate the immigration system, harm its integrity and cause difficulty for employers, who need the flexibility to deploy their staff to other parts of the UK. The independent and expert Migration Advisory Committee has repeatedly recommended that we should not operate different salary thresholds for different regions or nations across the UK.

I am aware of the concerns from the fishing industry about labour shortages. In the interests of time, I will just say that I am looking forward to meeting my counterpart in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and I am certainly happy to meet hon. Members to discuss this too. On the Afghan schemes, I will be happy to write to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), but I am very pleased that we were able to open that scheme and see the positive response to it.

Finally, I will speak to family immigration rules. As colleagues will be aware, on 10 September the Home Secretary paused any further increases to the minimum incomes requirement and commissioned the MAC to review the financial requirements in the family immigration rules. This review will ensure that we reach the right balance and have a solid evidence base for any future changes to the minimum income requirement. We expect that conducting a full review of the financial requirements will take approximately nine months. I urge hon. Members to provide views and evidence in response to the MAC's call for evidence, because I am sure we can all agree that a rich evidence base is essential to ensure that it can make effective recommendations and that policy is informed by evidence.

5.27 pm

**Claire Hanna:** I thank all hon. Members who have contributed. As the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) said, it is about many things, many people and many places. We all appreciate how complex this area of policy is. I appreciate that there was a lot of detail back and forth, but it is important that we are able to talk about the detail in a constructive, open way. We must push back against the myth that we are not allowed to talk about these things. It is important that we are open and honest with people about the impact it will have if we do not have workers in certain sectors.

I think the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) put it well when he said that it is important that we do not obsess over the shallow politics and that we are about the practical realities. The hon. Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) is right to say that it is about finding consensus—personally that is what I am all about politically. I think it is the best way to solve this. I do not think that people are being negatively impacted, though. I appreciate that there are pockets of it, and it is about directing the economic gains where they are needed in infrastructure terms. I do not recognise all the figures—by my calculations it is about 1.2 dependants per worker, and quite often a couple comes and both of them work in social care.

The elephant in the room is probably, as the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) put it, the lack of a long-term skills strategy. Many of the employers I



deal with would love to have the skills on the doorstep and not have to go through this complexity, but we do not have that. As I say, my intention was to ensure that the policies, when they change, reflect the economy we have and that the challenges of people who are trying to create jobs and wealth and increase productivity in my region and others are met halfway. If the Minister does

not mind, I would be grateful if we could follow up on some of those specifics and see how we can facilitate those changes—

5.30 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*



# Written Statements

Wednesday 13 November 2024

## ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

### Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage

**The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Sarah Jones):** Today, I am pleased to have laid a departmental minute setting out the details of a series of contingent liabilities associated with the carbon capture usage and storage track-1 clusters. Carbon capture usage and storage is a critical component of the UK meeting its 2050 net zero commitment particularly via ensuring energy and supply chain security and enabling hard-to-abate sectors to decarbonise.

The taking of these liabilities directly will address issues which have hampered previous attempts at a carbon capture usage and storage programme, in particular investor confidence and the risk of CO<sub>2</sub> store leakage. This support and the rapid launch of the programme fulfils the Government's aim to make the UK a global leader in carbon capture usage and storage, and ultimately creating a self-sustaining sector which supports not only UK business but also provides international opportunities.

Treasury approval has been granted and subject to satisfaction of conditions, we anticipate arrangements will begin to be implemented by the end of this month.

#### Context and rationale

Carbon capture usage and storage is the only feasible method for decarbonising many hard-to-abate sectors such as cement production, and is currently the most cost-effective method of decarbonising others, such as dispatchable power. While there is growing interest worldwide, a programme of this nature is first of a kind and consequently there are multiple market barriers which inhibit the development of a carbon capture usage and storage market in the UK.

Government support is necessary to address these challenges and enable carbon capture usage and storage deployment at scale. HMG is reducing investor risk in these technologies by bearing some of the initial risk inherent in developing a carbon capture usage and storage market, as well as the cross-chain risk existing across the participants in the network.

While the liabilities are in principle for the entire project duration, it is expected that in practice Government exposure will decrease as users come on to the system, insurers become more comfortable with the “first-of-a-kind” risks, and the depth of the market increases.

#### Details of the contingent liabilities

There are five contingent liabilities associated with the various track 1 contracts related to the following arrangements:

1. The supplemental compensation agreement is a long-term mechanism within the Government support package, which enables the management of leakage risks at the geological store during operations and the post closure period.

2. The revenue support agreement addresses demand-risks by providing for payments to CO<sub>2</sub> transport and storage companies if their allowed revenue is not covered by user fees.

3. The discontinuation agreement provides a right for the SoS to discontinue support to the transport and storage companies and entitles investors to be compensated for their investment.

4. The decommissioning shortfall agreement covers potential decommissioning fund shortfall which might arise if decommissioning is required before the fund has been fully built-up.

5. The discontinuation of capture project contracts allows for payment of compensation to capture projects for any losses due to a qualifying change in law or prolonged CO<sub>2</sub> transport and storage unavailability.

#### Exposure

The table below sets out the HMG's maximum exposure for each of the programme-associated contingent liabilities. These concern the five projects that were part of the October announcement: two transport and storage networks, Net Zero Teesside, Protos, and EET Hydrogen. We will notify Parliament of additional contingent liabilities when other projects reach financial close. It is important to note that while the table represents the maximum possible exposure, the probabilised exposures and likely crystallisations are far lower. There are robust risk management frameworks in place. Our assessments indicate that there no liabilities that are likely to be realised and the vast majority are very remote.

	Contingent liability	Maximum exposure (£m) across both track-1 clusters	Reasonable worst-case (£m) across both track-1 clusters
1	The Supplementary Compensation Agreement	9,034	400
2	The Revenue Support Agreement	9,804	5,739
3	Stranded Asset (discontinuation)	9,715	5,739
4	Decommissioning Shortfall	590	100-333
5	The Discontinuation of Capture Project contracts	5,302	2,055

The contingent liabilities are necessary as it provides confidence in this first of a kind sector. Carbon capture, usage and storage will enable us to accelerate to net zero while maintaining energy security and delivering growth to our industrial heartlands.

[HCWS211]

## ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

### Flood Resilience

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):** The Government extend their deepest sympathies to the citizens of Valencia and more widely across Spain, where recent floods have had devastating impacts on communities, including the tragic loss of more than 200 lives. These events are a stark reminder of the challenges we face in a changing climate.

This Government set up the first ever Floods Resilience Taskforce, on 12 September. The taskforce marks a new approach to preparing for flooding, and working



between national, regional and local government. It brings together Ministers and stakeholders, including DEFRA, MHCLG, Home Office, Cabinet Office, mayoral offices, the Environment Agency, the Met Office, devolved Administrations, local resilience forums, emergency responders, and the National Farmers Union, among others.

As announced at the autumn Budget 2024, the Government will invest £2.4 billion over two years to improve flood resilience and better protect communities across the country, including from coastal erosion.

But this Government inherited an outdated funding formula for allocating money to proposed flood defences. Established in 2011, the existing formula slows down the delivery of new flood schemes through a complex application process, and also neglects more innovative approaches to flood management such as nature-based approaches and sustainable drainage.

To speed up the delivery of new defences and ensure that the challenges facing businesses and rural and coastal communities are adequately taken into account, a consultation will be launched in the new year which will include a review of the existing formula. We also want to ensure that floods funding policy drives close partnership working and brings in wider financial contributions to flood schemes, to make Government funding go further.

Additional financial support will also be provided to rural communities, recognising the significant impact of flooding on farmers, and £50 million will be distributed to internal drainage boards—the public bodies responsible for managing water levels for agricultural and environmental needs in a particular area.

This transformational investment will put IDBs on a firm footing to deliver their vital role in flood and water management for years to come. IDBs that submit successful bids will be able to spend the £50 million on projects over the next two years. This will benefit projects that will improve, repair or replace IDB assets, including flood barriers, embankments and maintenance of watercourses. The funding will support projects which reduce risks and impacts from flooding to farmer and rural communities across England. The Environment Agency has begun work with IDBs to distribute the funding from today.

This follows confirmation of payments to farmers impacted by last year's severe weather through the farming recovery fund. A total of £60 million will be distributed to eligible farmers, via recovery payments of between £2,895 and £25,000 to around 13,000 farm businesses. Payments are expected to land in farmers' accounts from 21 November.

Taken together, the measures announced today will deliver meaningful change for communities across the country. They represent a significant package of funding and a promise of reform which show that this Government will continue to act to ensure people are better protected from flooding right across the country.

[HCWS214]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Ninja Swords

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** As part of the Government's aim to halve knife crime within a decade, we have a manifesto commitment to ban ninja swords and we will be making the relevant changes in secondary legislation. In preparation for this, today we are launching a public consultation to seek views on the legal definition of ninja swords and any associated defences to help with the planned legislation.

The consultation will run for a four-week period and provides an opportunity for the public to have their say.

A copy of the consultation and related options assessment will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS213]

### Weapons: Illegal Digital Content and Senior Executive Liability

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** As part of this Government's aim to halve knife crime within a decade, the Government have a manifesto commitment to establish personal liability measures on senior executives of online platforms and marketplaces that fail to take action to remove illegal content relating to knives and offensive weapons. Today we are launching a consultation to test views on how this commitment will be implemented in new legislation.

The consultation will run for a four-week period and provides an opportunity for the public to have their say.

A copy of the consultation and related options assessment will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS212]

# Petition

Wednesday 13 November 2024

## OBSERVATIONS

### TRANSPORT

#### Bradford District parking charges

*The petition of residents of the Bradford District,*

Declares that the proposed increase in car parking charges across the Bradford District and the introduction of new charges for residents' parking permits will place an unfair financial burden on residents and workers; notes concern that individuals are now being required by Bradford Council to pay to park outside their own homes; and further declares that new charges will adversely affect small businesses and retail outlets.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Bradford Council to reverse the proposed increases to car parking charges, and the new parking permit charges, across Keighley and Ilkley.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Robbie Moore, *Official Report*, 29 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 910.]

[P003018]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):*

The Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 and the Traffic Management Act 2004 are the governing pieces of legislation. Bradford city council is a local traffic authority, responsible for managing and regulating traffic on its roads. The legislation grants the council a range of powers to use in doing so.

Local authorities can set their own off-street and on-street parking charges (i.e. the price to park) under sections 35 and 46 respectively of the RTRA, but the

Government, through statutory guidance to which local authorities must have regard, encourage them to carefully consider the impact on motorists when doing so. Local authorities may vary parking charges via a notice under regulation 25 of the Local Authorities' Traffic Orders (Procedure) (England and Wales) Regulations 1996.

Statutory guidance recommends that a local authority sets its parking charges as part of meeting its wider parking strategy to meet its network management duty under section 16 of the TMA. It also says that parking policies should be proportionate, support town centre prosperity and reconcile competing demands for kerb space.

The objective of local parking policies is not to raise revenue. Section 55 of the RTRA requires any surplus raised from parking schemes to be directed to local authority-funded transport or environmental schemes.

Private car park owners are free to set their own parking terms and conditions. Responsibility for setting parking charges on local roads rests with the local authorities, who are best placed to balance the needs of residents, emergency services, local business and those who work in and visit the area.

I believe that setting on-street parking charges should remain the responsibility of local authorities, in accordance with powers available in the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 and with their various statutory duties. As well as the level of charges, authorities can also decide how charges are applied; an example is differential charges for certain classes of vehicles, such as those with diesel engines. Decisions by authorities should reflect the objectives of their local transport plans.

The Secretary of State's "Statutory Guidance to Local Authorities on the Civil Enforcement of Parking Contraventions" advocates that parking charges should be proportionate and should not be set at unreasonable levels. It also recommends that local authorities appraise their parking policies regularly, including parking charges, to ensure that they remain fit for purpose. The public and the police should be consulted as part of the appraisal process.







# ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 13 November 2024

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# PETITION

Wednesday 13 November 2024

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**not later than  
Wednesday 20 November 2024**

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