

**Wednesday  
20 November 2024**

**Volume 757  
No. 48**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 20 November 2024**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 20 November 2024*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Shared Rural Network

1. **Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Whether he is taking steps to accelerate the roll-out of the shared rural network. [901333]

**The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant):** The Government and industry are working together to accelerate the shared rural network and deliver substantial improvements to outdoor 4G mobile coverage across the UK. In the past few months, the Government have activated 13 publicly funded masts across the UK, and there are now 27 Government-funded extended area service mast upgrades delivering 4G.

**Greg Smith:** In my constituency, only 40, 50 and 60 miles away from this House, villages such as Cuddington are still complete mobile notspots. Will the Minister explain how quickly the Government intend to move on activating the shared rural network, to ensure no rural community is left without a reliable mobile signal?

**Chris Bryant:** I know about Cuddington, because the hon. Gentleman told me about it yesterday. Cuddington is such a typical English village that it has featured in “Midsomer Murders”, which is fictional—a bit like the previous Government’s financial affairs. I know we have said that the desire to please is not part of what Ministers are meant to do, but I do have a desire to please him and his constituents. The Government will work as fast as we can with industry to try to develop 4G in his constituency. I am happy to arrange for a meeting between him and my officials to ensure he has street-by-street analysis of how we can do that.

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

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): We welcome the recent update on the expansion of 4G to rural areas under the shared rural network project, particularly for businesses and farmers who are under such pressure at the moment, with the recent Treasury announcements. Which Secretary of State should we thank for the planning approval and funding of this vital infrastructure project?

**Chris Bryant:** We support developing all the plans set out under the shared rural network and Project Gigabit—those plans were regularly announced by the previous

Government, but they never actually put any money into the budget. There was never a line in a Department for Science, Innovation and Technology budget that said, “This money is guaranteed for the future.” We are putting our money where our mouth is and we are determined to ensure everybody has proper connectivity. Frankly, that is essential for people’s businesses, whether they are farmers or running any other kind of business, up and down the land. We will deliver that.

#### Digital Connectivity: Rural Areas

2. **Connor Naismith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve digital connectivity in rural areas. [901334]

**The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant):** We are improving digital connectivity in rural areas by rolling out 30 Project Gigabit contracts, filling in gaps that are not being met commercially, predominantly in rural areas, and delivering better 4G mobile coverage and eliminating partial notspots through the shared rural network.

**Connor Naismith:** A number of my constituents in the village of Haslington have been in touch with me about poor mobile signal and digital connectivity in the village. One constituent was unable to contact emergency services in the event of a medical emergency. Does the Minister agree that the lack of progress on connectivity in our rural areas under 14 years of Conservative Government is unacceptable? Will he meet me to discuss how we can improve matters for my constituents?

**Chris Bryant:** I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, not necessarily at the same time as I am meeting the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), but Haslington is a bit like Cuddington: they have exactly the same set of problems. I am sure many hon. Members from across the House have similar issues in their constituencies that they have a burning desire to raise with me. I am happy to make arrangements for hon. Members to meet officials and go through issues case by case. In relation to the 999 emergency my hon. Friend referred to, I would be grateful if he could provide me with specific details. All 999 calls from mobile phones should automatically roam on to another available network if there is no signal from their own provider, so I want to get to the bottom of the issue in that case.

**Jeremy Hunt** (Godalming and Ash) (Con): Can I add to the Minister’s list of beautiful villages to visit the wonderful villages of Cranleigh, Shamley Green, Peaslake, Gomshall and Bramley? They are all having big problems with 4G and 5G mobile phone reception, not least because apps need to be used to pay for parking there. Can he meet me to discuss what more can be done to help those beautiful, but also economically important, places?

**Chris Bryant:** I am very happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman as well. I am not the Pope, but it feels like I will be having a series of audiences over the next few weeks. The right hon. Gentleman has villages, I have villages. If only he knew someone who had been the Chancellor in recent years, who would have been able to deliver the financial support that we really needed to secure the investment.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): My constituents in the village of Crowthorne will welcome the Government's action to tackle this massive issue and support connectivity for phones and 4G in rural and semi-rural constituencies. Will the Minister have a meeting with me to discuss the issues affecting Crowthorne?

**Chris Bryant:** I am getting more popular day by day, which is unusual in my life. I am, of course, very happy to discuss the issues in Crowthorne.

One thing that really concerns me is that quite often, the published version of what connectivity is available in everybody's constituency will say that there is 92%, 93% or 95% of connectivity from all four operators, but actually, if we stand there with a mobile phone, there will not be any connectivity whatsoever. I have written to Ofcom and it has written back saying, for instance, that in that precise location the coverage may be above or below the predicted level, leading some consumers to not get the service they expected. There is a phrase for that.

**Mr Speaker:** Save it for another day.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): Organisations such as TechResort in my constituency support people who are digitally excluded to become digitally included. The Minister has a long list of meetings to go to, so instead, can the Secretary of State come along the coast to the sunniest town in the UK to visit TechResort and hear more about the funding it needs to power its work?

**Chris Bryant:** I am pleased to say that the Secretary of State says he will indeed visit when he possibly can.

There is a really important point here: poor digital connectivity excludes so many communities up and down this country. We have no chance of creating the economic growth that we want in this country unless we take the whole of the country with us. That is why it is so disgraceful that we have not had a proper digital inclusion strategy for 10 years. That is something we will remedy.

### Project Gigabit: Rural Areas

4. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of using Project Gigabit funding in urban areas on download speeds in rural areas. [901336]

**Chris Bryant:** Project Gigabit has always been designed to deliver gigabit-capable broadband to premises that will not be met by the market, regardless of whether they are in urban or rural areas. Most premises deemed uncommercial by the market are in rural areas, but consistent evidence suggests that we will also need to intervene in some urban areas to achieve full national gigabit coverage. Funding will continue to be provided where it is needed.

**Jerome Mayhew:** There are 11,500 houses that will be connected to fibre as a result of the Conservative Project Gigabit policy. There is real concern that some of those will miss out if money is redirected from rural to urban communities. After the family farm tax, can we please give rural communities a break?

**Chris Bryant:** The vast majority—more than 90%—of the spending in Project Gigabit has gone to rural areas because those are the areas most in need. There is absolutely no change in our policy to that. However, some urban areas have significant problems as well and we need to rectify those. The hon. Gentleman points out some of the issues in his own constituency. I am happy to provide him too with a meeting, if he wants. I see he has nodded.

### Innovation in the Black Country

5. **Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help increase levels of innovation in the Black Country. [901337]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark):** We want to boost investment in innovation and enable people in all regions of the UK to benefit from an innovation-led economy. That is why the spending review supports the UK's research and development ambition, with total Government investment in R&D rising to a record £20.4 billion in 2025-26. That allows us to extend innovation accelerators for another year, which will continue to bolster the west midlands' high-potential innovation clusters, fund the Midlands Industrial Ceramics Group through the Strength in Places fund, and support the region's investment zone.

**Alex Ballinger:** Last month, alongside Richard Parker, the Mayor of the West Midlands, I was lucky enough to join Halesowen college as it opened its new digital and media campus at Trinity Point. Does the Minister agree that excellent institutions such as this are fundamental to supporting innovation across our region, and would she be so kind as to visit us at some point in the near future?

**Feryal Clark:** I agree with my hon. Friend that educational institutes are crucial to innovation. Halesowen college is one of five colleges across the region using the further education and innovation fund to support innovation and technical excellence within the local community. Such facilities and expertise will help businesses to develop a workforce with skills and take advantage of that. I would be delighted to visit the Trinity Point college if the opportunity arises.

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

**Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Increasing levels of innovation across the UK are crucial to unlocking growth and solving some of our biggest problems. That is why I was worried to read about the Secretary of State saying that we have to apply "a sense of statecraft" to working with multinational tech companies. Does the Minister agree that what we should be doing is working with such companies as companies, not states, focusing on increasing healthy competition and supporting innovative UK businesses so that they are not left with the choice of being bought up or leaving the UK?

**Feryal Clark:** As I have said, increasing productivity right across the UK is fundamental to our mission to kick-start economic growth. Through our industrial strategy and the development of local growth plans, we

will build on local strengths to ensure that public and private research and development businesses right across the UK help local places to reach their potential. We are strengthening the relationships with businesses to deliver for British people.

### Frontier AI Safety

6. **Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): If he will take steps to support the creation of a global network of scientific research on frontier artificial intelligence safety. [901338]

**The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle):** The UK is a founding member of the AI Safety Institute international network. The network convenes for the first time today in San Francisco.

**Tony Vaughan:** The UK is a global leader in AI development, which brings many opportunities, but we know that the risks associated with AI can be managed only by global co-operation. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that the UK works with other main leaders in AI development, including the US and China, to ensure that the most advanced frontier AI models are safe for global consumers?

**Peter Kyle:** My hon. Friend is completely right to say that safety has to be there from the outset. We want our country to safely explore all the opportunities that AI offers, but it can do so only if people are reassured that safety is there from the outset. The UK safety institute is at the forefront of this. It is the first safety institute, and we are at the forefront of delivering international as well as domestic safety. We are currently working on an international review of the science of AI safety, which draws on the expertise of 30 countries.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Steve Darling.

**Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): On question number 13, Mr Speaker, may I ask the Minister what steps he will take to ensure that people who are visually impaired are able to engage—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Sorry—we have not reached that question. I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) rightly raises the need for research into frontier AI safety, and I welcome the Government's commitment to protecting the public from future AI risks. But AI affects all of our lives already. Today, my Committee launches an inquiry into algorithms, AI and their role in spreading online harm, as we saw in the terrible riots over the summer. As we build our evidence, how is the Minister building the evidence base on AI online harms and their social impact right now?

**Peter Kyle:** I am extremely grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for choosing this as her first inquiry. It is an incredibly important area. This Government are committed to the algorithmic transparency recording standard. The previous Government reneged on their commitment to having individual Departments releasing their standard statement each year. This Government

are committing to doing so again and will remain committed to reinforcing the fact that algorithms are there to serve people and not the other way round.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): There are many firms in Northern Ireland that have the capability and the experience to offer some advice on getting scientific research on AI safety. I know that the Minister is very interested in Northern Ireland, so has he had an opportunity to speak to companies in Northern Ireland so that we can play our part in how we take this matter forward?

**Peter Kyle:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for acknowledging my interest in Northern Ireland, which I have already visited since being appointed in order to meet some of the pioneering tech companies there. I will stay committed to ensuring that the Government recognise the talent across Northern Ireland, harnessing it for not just the domestic good but the global good.

### 5G Roll-out

7. **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): What comparative assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the roll-out of 5G in (a) the UK and (b) other countries. [901339]

**The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant):** Unfortunately, the UK's roll-out of 5G has been far too slow. According to Opensignal, the UK ranks 22nd out of 25 European countries for 5G download speeds and availability after 14 years of Conservative rule. We are determined to change that, aiming to have higher-quality stand-alone 5G in all populated areas by 2030.

**Alex Baker:** Access to 5G data is a real issue in Aldershot. According to Ofcom, a third of our households cannot connect to 5G—nearly three times the national average. What are the Government doing to give residents in Aldershot and Farnborough the same data access as the rest of the country, and will the Minister make that work a priority?

**Chris Bryant:** My hon. Friend is right: that work has to be a priority for businesses, families and everybody engaged in her constituency, and for the public sector. We want the Ministry of Defence in her constituency, for instance, to have the highest-quality data access possible, so that we can deliver more effective and productive government across the whole United Kingdom. The work will indeed be a priority for us.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): There have been great improvements in connectivity across Ceredigion Preseli, but there remain total mobile notspots such as Porthgain, and a growing body of evidence collected locally that the connectivity reported by Ofcom does not quite stack up against the lived experience of those on the ground. Will the Minister meet me so that I can present some of the evidence collected by local authorities in Ceredigion Preseli and he can address the problem?

**Chris Bryant:** The hon. Gentleman has just said what I said a few minutes ago. It is great that Plaid Cymru is signing up to the Labour party's agenda these days, but it is upsetting that he forgot to mention the seven high-quality masts extending better coverage of 4G in



Wales that have been installed in the last couple of months alone. Of course I will happily meet him, and place in the Library a copy of the letter that I received from Ofcom that makes the precise point that we need to do much better in recognising the real experience of people's mobile connectivity rather than a theoretical, ethereal version of it.

### Project Gigabit

8. **Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on the roll-out of Project Gigabit. [901340]

**The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant):** More than 30 Project Gigabit contracts are currently in place, with a total value of almost £2 billion, and more are in the pipeline. In the past few months, the first premises have been connected as part of Project Gigabit contracts in areas including Norfolk, West Yorkshire and south Wiltshire, and the build has now started in earnest in other parts of the country.

**Shaun Davies:** I welcome the progress that the Government are making on the roll-out of Project Gigabit to all corners of the country, but in Telford the inequality remains stark, with some wards having complete gigabit coverage and areas such as the world heritage site in Ironbridge having almost none. Will the Government confirm that their agenda to break down barriers to opportunity includes residents, businesses and world heritage sites that cannot get online?

**Chris Bryant:** The world heritage aspects relate to my Department for Culture, Media and Sport responsibilities, but my hon. Friend is right about Ironbridge. I hope that we will be able to announce something shortly in relation to extending gigabit coverage in his constituency through a procurement via Openreach.

**Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that there is a strong link between communications technology and the roll-out of smart meter technology in areas in the north of Scotland that are suffering from cold weather. Particularly at the moment, connectivity is really important for such alternative technologies to work. What discussions has he had with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero on that issue?

**Chris Bryant:** The hon. Gentleman is right: there is a series of issues about the security and safety of connectivity in areas that suffer from particular weather conditions. We had a successful summit on Monday morning to discuss the closing down of the public services network to ensure that everybody will be secure, but I assure him that we will work closely with the Scottish Government to ensure that the roll-out in all such areas works in the interests of businesses, whatever the weather conditions.

### Topical Questions

T1. [901348] **Dr Beccy Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle):** To protect people online, today I became the first Secretary of State to exercise the power to set out my strategic online safety proposals for Ofcom to consider. From increasing transparency to baking safety into social media platforms from the outset, those priorities will support Government in monitoring progress on acting where our laws are coming up short. I have also launched a new research project to explore the impact of social media on young people's wellbeing and mental health.

**Dr Cooper:** Each year millions of patients in England interact with two or more different hospital trusts. Most of the trusts that commonly see the same patients do not use the same record systems. What steps is the Minister taking with Cabinet colleagues to utilise the Centre for Improving Data Collaboration and other available technology to improve data sharing across NHS hospital trusts?

**Peter Kyle:** What a pleasure it is to speak from the Dispatch Box to another Labour MP from Sussex.

That issue is a Department of Health and Social Care responsibility but, on its behalf, the Data (Use and Access) Bill will include a requirement that IT providers in the NHS have to meet information standards. That will deliver the interoperability needed so that data can be shared across the NHS, often for the very first time.

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

**Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): On the Opposition Benches we are proud that it was the last Conservative Government who created the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. I am glad that Labour is following our agenda, and I look forward to my exchanges with the Secretary of State.

Under the last Conservative Government, Britain was home to more billion dollar tech start-ups than France and Germany combined, but last month an industry survey found that nearly 90% of tech founders would consider leaving Britain if Labour raised taxes on tech businesses. Yesterday, Labour U-turned on policy in Scotland, so today will the Secretary of State commit to reversing Labour's jobs tax, which damages tech businesses across the entire country?

**Peter Kyle:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his post. We worked together on the all-party parliamentary group on the fourth industrial revolution, which he chaired, and I look forward to having a constructive relationship going forward.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the last Government. Given the way the Conservatives are going, that will have been their last Government. To be honest, the circumstances that businesses, large and small, operating in the tech landscape have asked for are a smooth regulatory process—we have already delivered regulatory reform; reform to planning—we have delivered reform to the planning system; a stable financial settlement—we have delivered that with a Budget for—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Please, this is topicals. We will see a very good example from the shadow Secretary of State.

**Alan Mak:** I thank the Secretary of State for his kind words, but he has punished labour: figures from his own Department show that workers will be losing out by nearly £800 each per year as a result of Labour's Budget. Will he stand up to the Chancellor and oppose any further tax rises on Britain's hard-working tech sector?

**Peter Kyle:** The Budget gave a pay rise to working people in this country and set the conditions for a stable economy, fixing the black hole left in our economy by the mismanagement of the last Government.

T4. [901352] **James Asser** (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): Last week I was at London City airport's STEM event, which brought together 500 students from secondary schools across east London. Does the Secretary of State agree that if we are to see thriving STEM industries, we need more engagement events like that?

**Peter Kyle:** Outside the classroom, the CyberFirst programme has engaged 250,000 young people across the UK. Those are the first steps; this Government will be going further.

T2. [901349] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): Recently, I hosted a briefing event for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, where strong evidence was presented that almost all drug research and research into other products could be done without abusing animals. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to ensure that we no longer experiment on animals and that we use other methods to get products into service?

**Peter Kyle:** I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question, because the first job I ever had was at the Body Shop working for Anita Roddick, and I joined her campaign against animal testing for cosmetics. She would be proud to see me at the Dispatch Box engaging in this conversation. Labour made a manifesto commitment to phase out animal testing in the long term. That is something we are committed to and something we are taking steps towards.

T5. [901353] **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): The peddling of fake news and disinformation on social media platforms is fuelling extremism. It also impacts heavily on our democratic processes in the UK. What safeguards are the Government putting in place to combat this really serious issue?

**Peter Kyle:** I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for raising one of the most serious issues of our time. The Online Safety Act 2023 requires providers, as part of their risk assessment, to consider specifically how algorithms will impact a user's exposure to illegal content and children's exposure to harmful content. I have introduced new measures to ensure that children are kept safe, and today I issued a statement of strategic priority to Ofcom to insist that it continues to do so in future.

T3. [901351] **David Davis** (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): Last year, nearly 50 British universities were identified as having research ties with what are deemed very high-risk Chinese institutions. Subsequently, the intelligence services briefed 24 universities on resisting the infiltration attempts of foreign agencies, but the

Intelligence and Security Committee report states that it is "highly likely" that joint UK-China research projects are used for military purposes. What is the Department doing to protect our research and our security?

**Peter Kyle:** The Government are working closely with individual universities, the university sector and our intelligence community to ensure that our research is not only world class but safe and secure.

## PRIME MINISTER

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

Q1. [901318] **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 20 November.

**The Deputy Prime Minister (Angela Rayner):** I have been asked to reply. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has attended the G20 summit, strengthening the UK's ties with major economies to drive jobs and security at home.

This week marks 1,000 days of Putin's barbaric war in Ukraine. We will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. This week also marks Equal Pay Day. I am extremely proud that this Government have introduced the Employment Rights Bill, strengthening the rights of working women and making work pay.

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

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I recently met members of the British Association for Biological Anthropology and Osteoarchaeology, who highlighted a loophole in the Human Tissue Act 2004 allowing human remains to be auctioned, frequently disguised as modified items or replicas. Such items have included a foetal skeleton posed under a glass dome, a human thigh bone turned into a cane, a human jawbone necklace and the varnished skull of a six year old, and are often from indigenous communities in Africa and Asia, having been stolen during colonial expeditions. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that it is abhorrent for human remains, regardless of their origin or age, to be sold by auction houses and on social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook, eBay, Etsy and Gumtree, and will the Government take action to end that depraved practice?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that sensitive issue. It is absolutely horrifying to hear her account of it, and I agree that it is abhorrent. Although the Human Tissue Authority strictly regulates the public display of human remains, with fines or imprisonment for breaches, it does not cover sales or purchases. However, I will ensure that a meeting is arranged with the appropriate Minister to discuss the troubling cases that my hon. Friend raises.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am very happy to associate myself and the official Opposition with the right hon. Lady's remarks about Ukraine. Democracies must stand together.

What are the Government doing to bring down inflation?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I think it is astonishing that—first, may I welcome the hon. Member to his place? Many people might not know that he was the Minister with responsibility for growth when, under Liz Truss, inflation was at 11.1% and growth flatlined, so we are doing much better than he did.

**Alex Burghart:** Well, I thank the right hon. Lady for her standard charm. The truth is that the Government are not doing anything to bring down inflation; this Government are stoking inflation. First, we had above-inflation pay rises for the unions. Then, we had a Budget that the Office for Budget Responsibility said would increase inflation—*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. *[Interruption.]* I am going to hear the question. I suggest that we all hear it together—then our constituents can understand the answer as well as the question.

**Alex Burghart:** First, we had above-inflation pay rises for the unions. Then we had a Budget that the OBR said was going to push up inflation. This morning, we had City economists—real economists—saying that next year inflation will hit 3%. Does the right hon. Lady agree that this Government's decisions mean higher inflation for working people?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I ask the hon. Gentleman: 11.1% or 3%?

**Alex Burghart:** We have already talked about Ukraine. It was Ukraine and covid that drove up inflation, but this Government are doing it to the British people. High tax, high inflation, low growth, low reform—there is a word for that: it is Starmerism.

Yesterday, like many Opposition Members, I spoke to farmers from across the United Kingdom. Some of them were families who have farmed their land for centuries—elderly men in tears, children worried about their parents and all of them worried that their way of life is about to be destroyed. What would the right hon. Lady like to say to them?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** First of all, we are absolutely committed to our British farmers, and—*[Interruption.]* That is why we have committed £5 billion to the farming budget over the next two years. That is the largest ever amount for sustainable food production in the UK, and it is alongside £60 million to support those affected by extreme wet weather and over £200 million to tackle disease outbreaks. The hon. Gentleman's party could not even get the money out the door for farmers, failing to spend over £300 million on farming budgets. The farmers know that they were in it for themselves, and that is why we are in government and they are not.

**Alex Burghart:** Perhaps the right hon. Lady thinks that everyone came to London yesterday to thank the Government. Let us look at the facts. A typical mid-size, 360-acre family farm in the constituency of my hon.

Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) have spoken to their accountant. Their new liability because of this Government is half a million pounds. That is 12 years' worth of profit. When this generation passes away, that farm will become totally unviable, and it is just one of thousands and thousands of similar farms.

It is clear the Government have not got their facts right. The Central Association for Agricultural Valuers—the real experts in this field—say so. The National Farmers Union says so; it is shortly to publish a report showing that 75% of all commercial farms will fall above the threshold. If the Government are not going to reverse this terrible policy, will the right hon. Lady at least commit to no further increases to inheritance tax and no further reductions in agricultural property relief or business property relief in this Parliament?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman talks about the facts, and I absolutely stand by the figures that the Government have set out. The vast majority of estate owners will be totally unaffected. The hon. Gentleman wants to talk about the figures. I will be crystal clear: the vast majority of estate owners will see no change and pay no tax on land passed on that is valued at £1 million. Couples can pass on £3 million tax-free, and those above the threshold will pay only half the normal rate and can pay it over 10 years interest-free.

**Alex Burghart:** This is just another part of the Budget that is unravelling. Everyone here and all the farmers at home will have heard that there was no guarantee there. We know what that means: they are coming back for more. Even if the right hon. Lady had made a promise today, it would not have been worth a fig. We know that the Environment Secretary, before the election, promised the farmers that this would not happen. Labour promises get broken.

Let us put all this into context. The Treasury says that the family farms tax will raise on average £441 million a year. The Treasury also says that the public sector pay rises the Government announced in July will cost £9.4 billion a year. That is over 21 times as much. Why do the Government think that above-inflation pay rises for the trade unions are worth so—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I do not need any more from the second Government Bench. Please, less of it—we have had a bit of a run-in recently, and I do not need to have any more.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I think it is an audacity for the hon. Gentleman to stand at the Dispatch Box and suggest in some way that Labour broke promises or raised taxes. I will school the hon. Gentleman: it was his Government who raised taxes to their highest level for a generation. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Sorry? We will have less of that as well, unless you want to go and have a cup of tea. Will we hear any more? Is that it, now? Yes or no?

**Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Con): Are you talking to me, Mr Speaker?

**Mr Speaker:** Absolutely. You are the one who was mouthing.



**Danny Kruger:** I have not opened my mouth yet.

**Mr Speaker:** Well, I am sorry, but you must be able to do it like a ventriloquist's dummy.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** It was the hon. Gentleman's Government who crashed the economy—who saw inflation rise to 11.1% and growth flatline. It was his Government who spent the reserves three times over. I will take no lessons from the hon. Gentleman.

**Alex Burghart:** I understand why the right hon. Lady does not want to answer questions about the terrible choices the Government have made. It is because the truth is ugly. The truth is that this is a punishment meted out to people who do not vote Labour. It is the same punishment meted out to parents who send their children to private schools. It is the same punishment meted out to the owners of small businesses who are terrified about national insurance contributions, and it is the same punishment meted out to pensioners who cannot afford to pay for their fuel this winter. Is it not the truth that if you do not vote Labour, they do not care about you? [HON. MEMBERS: "More!"]

**Mr Speaker:** There will be more, and it will not be what you want more of.

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** After that display, it is clear that the hon. Gentleman did not recognise the result of the general election and has learned nothing. While this Government have been fixing the mess that the Conservatives left, they have been desperately trying to rewrite history. They come here every week, jumping on a new bandwagon and taking a new pot-shot, but with absolutely no word on what they will do differently.

Last week, the Leader of the Opposition admitted that she supported Labour's plans to invest in the NHS, schools and homes. The Conservatives want all the benefits of the Budget, but have no idea how they will pay for them. The faces may change, but it is the same old Tory party: straight back to putting everything on the credit card, spending the reserves three times over. We took the difficult decisions to fix the £22 billion black hole that they left behind, and while they are reinventing the past, we are investing in the future.

Q8. [901325] **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): In a new report, Human Rights Watch has set out irrefutably how Israeli authorities are committing the war crime of forcible transfer in Gaza, which amounts to crimes against humanity. Israel's evacuation system fails to ensure civilian safety. Civilians are not provided with access to health, nutrition and shelter, that is compounded by the banning of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and much of Gaza is now uninhabitable. Will the Government acknowledge that Israel has carried out mass forced displacement in Gaza, and will they take concrete measures on arms, trade and Israeli officials in order to comply with their duty to prevent genocide and protect Palestinian lives?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** The situation in the middle east is catastrophic, and I know the whole House is horrified at the terrible loss of civilian life. We are calling at every opportunity for an immediate ceasefire, with the release of the hostages and more aid into

Gaza, but we urge Israel to ensure that UNRWA can continue its lifesaving work, something the Foreign Secretary has discussed directly with the Israeli Foreign Minister. We have imposed sanctions in response to appalling incidents of settler violence and have suspended export licences for arms, following a review that found a clear risk that they may be used to commit or facilitate violations of international law. We will continue to seek a two-state solution, with a secure Israel alongside a viable and sovereign Palestine.

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

**Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): May I associate myself and the Liberal Democrats with the Deputy Prime Minister's remarks on Ukraine?

Ahead of the Budget, I warned the Deputy Prime Minister that increasing national insurance contributions on social care providers would make the crisis in social care worse. Now, OBR figures suggest that the increase in NICs will cost more to social care providers than the money the Government have announced for that sector in the Budget, with that measure alone withdrawing £200 million from the sector. Will the Deputy Prime Minister speak with the Chancellor to ensure that, at the very least, health and care providers are protected from taking the hit?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Member for that question. The Chancellor is sat near me, and I know that, through our discussions, we wanted to ensure that social care was protected. That is why we confirmed £600 million of new grant funding for social care next year, an uplift to local government spending and an £86 million increase to the disabled facilities grant. Our Employment Rights Bill will help deliver the first ever fair pay agreement for the social care sector as well, and we will also ensure that the NHS is funded to help with the social care situation.

**Daisy Cooper:** It is clear that social care providers will be worse off, so I urge the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor to look again at that.

Somebody else who was worried about the Budget is Cathy, a farmer in my constituency, who told me yesterday that she thinks the Government changes simply do not make sense. They mean that her family may have to pay a bill that will force them to sell land, which makes food production unviable. At the same time, the Government have not closed the land-buying tax loophole that can be exploited by equity firms and the super-wealthy. Farmers told me yesterday that they feel as though they were betrayed by the Conservatives, and they now feel—*[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Daisy Cooper:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Farmers told me yesterday that they feel as though they have been betrayed by the Conservatives, but they now feel that they have also been lied to by Labour. Will the Deputy Prime Minister think again on this measure, so that our farmers can feed Britain?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** Again, I am sorry to hear that Cathy is distressed by the scaremongering around what the Labour party is doing. The Budget delivered £5 billion for farming over the next two years—a

record amount. The last Government failed to spend £300 million on farmers. Our plan is sensible, fair and proportionate, and protects the smaller estates while fixing public services that they rely on.

**Q9.** [901326] **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): There are only seven places in England, according to the House Library, where school funding per pupil is lower than in Aldershot and Farnborough. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that something has gone badly wrong when teachers are forced to pay out of their own pocket for basic school supplies, while many others have left the profession in droves over the past 14 years? Will Ministers work with me to tackle the root of this problem so that we can give every young person, in my constituency and beyond, the very best start in life?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** Every child deserves the opportunity to succeed in school and beyond, and I am sorry to hear of the experience in my hon. Friend's constituency. Last week, I visited Ravensfield primary school in my constituency, and its school council had a lot to say about the resources to our schools. We have increased the core schools budget by £2.3 billion next year, increasing per-pupil funding in real terms. As her constituency is the home of the British Army, I know she will also welcome the expansion of childcare support to service families deployed overseas, saving families around £3,400 a year. I am happy to ensure that she gets a meeting with the relevant Minister.

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Reform): A few weeks ago, from that Dispatch Box, the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs said he had been congratulated by a farmer on the introduction of the inheritance tax. I think that farmer must have been a cannabis farmer, because yesterday we had 10,000 farmers on Whitehall protesting against this madcap decision. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that the decision should be thrown in the trash can, along with Rachel from accounts' CV?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** The hon. Member talks about CVs, and it is good to see him doing well on his Bench: once a Labour councillor, then a Tory MP, now a Reform Chief Whip. Every time he switches party, he gets a promotion. I have already outlined what we have done to support our farmers. We will continue to support the farmers and we will continue to invest in our public services to get Britain back on track.

**Q10.** [901327] **Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend has come under intense scrutiny from the press at different times, and she must have found it difficult. A press that is free to scrutinise politicians is vital in a free society and a democracy. Is she as concerned as I am by the Stasi-like interview that was given to Allison Pearson of *The Daily Telegraph* a week last Sunday? Does she agree that the Essex police force and other police forces would be better trying to deal with shoplifting, burglaries and other crimes, rather than intimidating journalists?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** Free speech and our press are incredibly important—they are part of our democracy—but in direct response to my hon. Friend's question, the police are independent and it is a live

investigation, so it would not be appropriate for me to comment on that. I believe that we should have a free press. It is part of our democracy, and we should have free speech, but with that comes responsibility for those who do it.

**Q2.** [901319] **Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Yesterday, I met three constituents in Parliament: Duncan Hawley, his wife Nicola and his 10-year-old daughter Hattie. Duncan is a sheep farmer, and he has stewarded his family farm for most of his life. He is outraged, hurt and worried about the Government's deeply damaging family farm tax. He is deeply worried about food security, food inflation and whether he will even be able to pass that farm on to future generations. My question to the Deputy Prime Minister is simple: why have this Labour Government declared war on British farmers?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I say to the hon. Gentleman and to Duncan and Nicola that this Government have not declared war on farmers. The vast majority of farms will not pay any inheritance tax. We have protected them. We have been as generous as we can. The farmers rely on our public services, like everybody else. We inherited a £22 billion black hole from the Conservatives, who spent reserves three times over. We are investing in our schools, our hospitals, our public services and housing. If the hon. Gentleman does not agree with that, then, like the Leader of the Opposition, he should say what he would do differently.

**Q11.** [901328] **Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): The previous Government failed countless women through chronic underfunding of maternity services. At Stroud maternity hospital, post-natal beds have remained closed for more than two years. Local, midwife-led units, such as Stroud, deliver fantastic quality of care for women, while having low intervention rates during birth. Can the Deputy Prime Minister outline what steps this Government will take to improve maternity services?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I am sorry to hear about the situation in Stroud, and I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue for women in his constituency. The Darzi report clearly set out that under the previous Government, the NHS was broken, with patients waiting too long for care. We are committed to ensuring that all women and babies receive safe, compassionate and personalised care through pregnancy, birth and, critically, the following months. We will ensure that maternity services deliver the best outcomes for patients as we invest to build an NHS fit for the future.

**Q3.** [901320] **Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I know how much professional care work means to the Deputy Prime Minister. Cariad Care Homes in Porthmadog tells me that it will not be able to absorb the additional exorbitant costs imposed by her Government's Budget. It tells me that they pose a threat worse than covid to the business. Will she therefore personally intervene, so that her Government at least make care providers exempt from the rise in employers' national insurance contributions?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** The right hon. Lady is right to say that I value the work of care providers and carers across the whole of the United Kingdom. That is why we have put in additional funding through the

Budget. We have been ensuring that for care providers and charities, including hospices, the tax regime is among the most generous in the world. That includes tax relief for charities and their donors worth more than £6 billion for the tax year ending April 2024. We have put record funding into our NHS, we have increased funding into adult and children's social care and we will continue to support our public services, which were left on their knees by the last Government.

**Q13. [901330] Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab):** Two weeks ago, the Chancellor announced a historic £22.6 billion investment into the NHS, because it is our duty to rescue this country's health service after 14 years of mismanagement, under-investment and, unfortunately, misleading announcements from the Conservative party. In Plymouth, Derriford hospital, which I represent, serves not just my constituency but 19 constituencies across the south-west—it is the only major trauma centre for adults in the south-west—but we have suffered from the decisions made by the Conservatives. Will the Deputy Prime Minister outline how that historic investment will make its way to Plymouth?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for being such a champion for Plymouth. As he knows, we are providing £25 billion extra over the next two years for the Department of Health and Social Care, including the largest real-terms capital budget since 2010. We will ensure that every corner of the UK will see the generosity, and that services will improve for them. I will make sure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss in detail how Plymouth can capitalise on that.

**Q4. [901321] Lewis Cocking (Bromborough) (Con):** The town of Cheshunt in my constituency has no banks or building societies, and we have been told that we are not eligible for a banking hub. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that every town that wants a banking hub should be eligible for one, so that my residents have access to their hard-earned cash?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** We have committed to 350 banking hubs through this Parliament. I am sure that the Minister will be happy to meet the hon. Member on that point. I hope he will thank for the levelling-up fund round 2 money that we secured, with £14.3 million going to Waltham Cross renaissance project, to regenerate the town centre for his constituents.

**Q15. [901332] Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab):** I know better than most that, under the last Tory Government, neighbourhood policing was stripped away, leaving the police invisible in towns such as those I represent. As a former police inspector, I am delighted that the new Labour Government have committed to rebuild neighbourhood policing. Will the Deputy Prime Minister assure my constituents that Labour's neighbourhood policing guarantee will soon ensure that every town has a dedicated neighbourhood team?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his expertise and his work before he came to this place. Tory austerity has decimated neighbourhood policing.

We will put thousands more neighbourhood police and police community support officers back on our streets, to ensure that every community has a named local officer. We will tackle illegal drugs, halve knife crime, crack down on antisocial behaviour and go after the gangs who lure young people into violence.

**Q5. [901322] Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con):** The Scottish and Welsh Governments have banned the construction of new waste incinerators because of health and pollution concerns. The previous Government paused them and committed to banning them. Why are this Government busy approving them?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we always follow the strict rules on planning, ensuring that safety and other factors are always taken into consideration, and we will continue to do so.

**Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab):** Thousands of families in my constituency have moved into new-build developments in Shinfield, Loddon Park and beyond. But many have found their dreams of home ownership punctured by unfair and opaque property management charges. Can the Deputy Prime Minister reassure my constituents by setting out how the leasehold reform Bill will address those concerns, and will she meet me and affected constituents?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I welcome my hon. Friend to her place. Unjustified increases to service charges are completely unacceptable. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 will provide homeowners with greater rights, powers and protections over their homes, including greater transparency over service charges. Leaseholders have been ripped off for too long. It is this Government who will sort it out.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Father of the House.

**Q6. [901323] Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con):** Today is Red Wednesday, when we remember all those worldwide who are persecuted for their belief. A recent report by Aid to the Church in Need shows that in the countries surveyed the persecution of minorities increased by 60%. In the light of that, will the Government commit to reappointing the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion and belief, a post that has remained vacant since July, as soon as possible and hopefully by Christmas, so that we in the United Kingdom can play our part in defending religious and belief minorities worldwide?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. We are committed to championing human rights, including the right to freedom of religion and belief. I join him in marking Red Wednesday, an important moment to show support for all those persecuted around the world for their religion and belief. Today, we will light up Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office buildings in the UK in red in support of that. Envoy roles are under consideration and will be decided on in due course.

**Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab):** Harshita Brela was killed and found in the boot of her car as it was taken from her home in Corby on



14 November. This tragic murder left a community shocked and scared, and it is being investigated by the police. Harshita was protected by a domestic violence protection order that lasted 28 days. It was not renewed. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that all must be done to reassure the community and bring the perpetrator to justice? Further, does she agree that in some circumstances domestic violence protection orders should last longer than 28 days, when the victims are most vulnerable?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this case. My thoughts are with Harshita's family in this horrifying set of circumstances, where Harshita should have been protected and felt protected. The Government are committed to halving violence against women and girls. We continue to do our work, hopefully across the House, to make sure that we can end the circumstances Harshita faced and we can stop this kind of barbaric action.

Q7. [901324] **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): The Spelthorne Litter Pickers is an outstanding organisation of 1,000 volunteers who do great work up and down my constituency, come rain or shine. Last week, they were awarded the King's Award for Voluntary Service. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Would the Deputy Prime Minister, the Government and indeed the whole House like to join me in congratulating the Spelthorne Litter Pickers and thank them for all they do?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** Mr Speaker, what can I say? I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman—may I say my hon. Friend?—about the Spelthorne Litter Pickers. Those who come together to volunteer and help, in particular young people who do a lot of this, play an important role in all our constituencies. I think across the whole House we congratulate the Spelthorne Litter Pickers on their award, and all those who do voluntary work to support our communities.

**Paula Barker** (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a very proud trade union member. In 2019, the Conservative party promised to deliver an employment Bill that would protect and enhance workers' rights in the UK. Like so many of its promises it never delivered, but my right hon. Friend has done it, clearing up the mess that the party opposite left behind. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree with me that her Employment Rights Bill is the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I too declare an interest: my hon. Friend and I used to be convenors for Unison North West, and I champion the work that she has done on behalf of her constituents and for working people. The Government are delivering on their plan to make work pay, and to ensure that employment rights are fit for a modern economy. The Employment Rights Bill will benefit people in some of the most deprived areas in the country, and will save them up to £600 a year in replacing lost income from the hidden costs of insecure work. I commend the work that many Members—some on the Opposition Benches, but in particular some on ours—have done to bring the Bill to fruition.

Q12. [901329] **Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The whole House recognises the authenticity of the right hon. Lady's back story—her pride in being a carer, and indeed in her recent elevation. In contrast, the chief constable of Northamptonshire was sacked in June for misrepresenting his CV, and just last month a nurse, Tanya Nasir, was imprisoned for five years for doing the same. Does the right hon. Lady agree that such serious consequences are right and just in such cases?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I know where the right hon. Gentleman is trying to go with this. While it is tempting—[*Interruption.*] What I will say to the right hon. Gentleman is that in the last four months our Chancellor has shown more competence than the last four Chancellors that were appointed by his Government.

**Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Despite being its capital, my home city of Edinburgh is, per head, the lowest-funded local authority in Scotland owing to the austerity inflicted on us by the Scottish National party in Holyrood, which means that great projects such as The Ripple face closure. Now that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has secured the biggest block grant for Scotland in the history of the Scottish Parliament, will the Deputy Prime Minister work with me to ensure that the Scottish Government use it to end austerity for my constituents?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who is entirely right to raise the subject of the impact of the SNP's irresponsible management of Scotland's finances and the austerity that it is inflicting on his constituents. Our Budget rejected a return to austerity. We delivered the largest real-terms funding settlement for Scotland since devolution, and the result of the Budget is clear: the SNP has the powers, it has the money, and it has no more excuses.

Q14. [901331] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): Last week I was contacted by a constituent whose husband has stage 4 bowel cancer. He had a routine scan in June but did not receive the results until early November, and unfortunately during that period he received unsuitable chemotherapy and his cancer has progressed. Given that Shropshire has the worst record in the country for CT and MRI scan results, may I ask the Deputy Prime Minister the same question that my constituent has asked me? When will the Government address this problem?

**The Deputy Prime Minister:** I am sincerely sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent's husband, the terrible diagnosis at stage 4, and the delays leading up to that. We have explained before how difficult the inheritance was in respect of the cancer diagnosis waiting lists. People are waiting far too long for treatment, which is why the Chancellor put a record amount of money into our NHS so that we could catch cancer in time. I know that the Health Secretary is determined, as a personal endeavour, to ensure that people do not have to wait and do not end up in the circumstances that are so tragic for the hon. Lady's constituent.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Just for the record, I should like to apologise to Mr Kruger. I got the wrong person. Mr Wild has now owned up to it. [*Laughter.*] What I would say to Mr Kruger is, "Don't sit next to him again."



## Police Reform

12.40 pm

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on police reform.

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson)**: I will respond on behalf of the Secretary of State, and I thank the hon. Lady for securing this important question on what is an important subject.

At its best, policing in England and Wales is truly world class. Every day, officers perform their duties with courage, skill and dedication, and we are all grateful to all of them. At the heart of our British policing tradition is the notion of policing by consent, which is dependent on maintaining mutual bonds of trust between officers and the local communities they serve. But over the last decade or more policing has faced a perfect storm as visible neighbourhood policing has been decimated, as law enforcement has struggled to keep up with fast-changing crimes, as outdated technology has held forces back, and as confidence has fallen in communities and among victims because far too often people feel that if something goes wrong no one will come and nothing will be done.

For too long, instead of Government showing leadership and helping the police to navigate these testing times, predecessors in our Department have just walked away. This Government will not stand on the sidelines while public confidence and public safety are put at risk, and that is why we are pursuing our unprecedented safer streets mission to reduce the most serious violence and to rebuild confidence in policing and the criminal justice system.

To successfully deliver that mission, we need forces that are fit for the challenge of today and tomorrow. That is why the Home Secretary yesterday announced a programme of police reform that will be pursued in partnership with policing. Under our neighbourhood policing guarantee, we will restore patrols to town centres and rebuild the vital link between forces and the people they serve. To drive up performance and standards, a new performance unit will be established in the Home Office which will use high-quality police data to spot trends and improve performance and consistency. And we will work with policing to create a national centre of policing to bring together crucial support services such as IT, aviation and forensics. We will present a White Paper on police reform to Parliament next year.

The 2025-26 police funding settlement for police forces, including full details on Government grant funding and precept, will be set out to Parliament in the normal way before Christmas, but the Home Secretary confirmed in her written statement yesterday that, as part of that settlement, direct central Government funding for policing next year will increase by £0.5 billion. That is core grant and additional funding for neighbourhood policing, counter-terrorism and the National Crime Agency.

We are at a critical juncture for policing and we cannot go on as we have been. So together with the police we will embark on this road map for reform, to get back to those precious Peel principles and to rebuild the confidence of our communities in the vital work the police do every day to keep us all safe.

**Lisa Smart**: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

Yesterday the Home Secretary announced significant reforms to policing through a written statement. A comprehensive restructuring of policing in England and Wales that will affect thousands of personnel, create a new performance unit and establish a national centre for policing surely merits some parliamentary scrutiny and an opportunity for Members of this House to question what it means for their constituents.

For my Hazel Grove constituents, what does it mean for Mellor, the most rural part of my constituency? There was no specific mention of rural crime in the Home Secretary's statement, so I ask the Minister what her plans mean for those tackling crime in our rural communities. What do the plans mean for places like Woodley, a district centre in Hazel Grove, which has seen far too much antisocial behaviour and shoplifting? And what do the plans mean for places like Offerton, where illegal off-road bikes are causing havoc on our roads? How will the plans better encourage the police to work with local partners to tackle this problem, which blights so many people's lives? Any police reform must address the Conservatives' cuts to the number of police community support officers, who are so often the face of proper neighbourhood policing. My police force, Greater Manchester, has seen more than 350 PCSO positions cut since 2015.

More than anything, we need to ensure that the reforms deliver the proper frontline policing that our communities deserve. Years of ineffective resourcing by the previous Conservative Government have left our police forces overstretched, under-resourced and unable to focus on the crimes that affect our communities the most. It is no wonder that the vast majority of burglaries still go unsolved, while for seven out of 10 car thefts last year, a police officer did not even attend the scene.

It is genuinely good to hear that more resources will be committed to neighbourhood policing, but as we saw with the Conservatives' police uplift programme, more resources does not automatically mean that communities will see the difference. I would welcome assurances from the Minister that the Government will ensure that officers have the time and resources to focus on their communities, and will ensure more bobbies on the beat.

**Dame Diana Johnson**: I very much welcome the hon. Lady's interest in this area. The written ministerial statement laid before Parliament yesterday set out the direction of travel for this Government on police reform. As I said in my response to the urgent question, a White Paper will be published in the spring. There will be full consultation with, I hope, parliamentary colleagues as well as those involved in policing, police and crime commissioners, and all the key stakeholders. This is the start of the process, so many of the hon. Lady's questions will be part of the consultation and the conversations that we have next year, but I reassure her that the safer streets mission is about the neighbourhood policing guarantee. It is about delivering 13,000 additional police officers, PCSOs and specials in our neighbourhoods and reinvigorating the neighbourhood policing model.

The hon. Lady mentioned antisocial behaviour and shoplifting. Those are issues that we will deal with, and we will bring forward legislation, particularly around shop theft. That will include a stand-alone offence of

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

assaulting a shopworker, and the removal of the £200 threshold that the previous Government introduced, which meant that there was almost a shoplifters' charter—they could steal up to £200-worth of items and there would be no action. We are getting rid of that. We are taking action now, but we will have a conversation about broader police reform next year. The statement was about setting out the direction of travel.

**Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): On Friday, I spent some time on patrol with Telford police, and Sergeant Alex Webb told me about her frustration at not being able to get repeat antisocial behaviour offenders out of our town centres and high streets. When will the Government give the police the tools that they need to deal with these issues and get the yobs out of our high streets and town centres?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. This is Antisocial Behaviour Awareness Week, which aims to focus on the effect that antisocial behaviour can have on individuals and communities. He is absolutely right to say that we need to tackle antisocial behaviour. That is why the neighbourhood policing guarantee, which will get officers back on the streets, and the other measures that we will introduce to keep our town centres and high streets safe, are so important. We will bring those forward in due course.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): Let me welcome the Policing Minister to her role; she is succeeding me in the job that I did in the last Government. I genuinely wish her well in the job, and I hope that she succeeds in it, because it is important for the whole country. I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in thanking the police up and down the country for the work that they do to keep us safe. When they put on their uniform to go to work each morning, they take risks that are required of those in few other professions.

In March this year, the police headcount hit 149,769—a record number of police, and 3,000 higher than the previous record. My first question is: will the Policing Minister commit to at least maintaining, if not growing, that record number of police officers? Secondly, will the Minister join me in welcoming the fact that in the past seven years, overall crime, as measured by the crime survey for England and Wales—the Office for National Statistics says that is the best measure of crime trends—has come down by 17%? The written statement yesterday, and the Home Secretary's speech to the National Police Chiefs' Council yesterday, mentioned the importance of technology, which I feel very strongly about, as the Minister knows. In the March Budget, the previous Chancellor committed to £230 million of spending on police technology over four years, of which this year is the first. About £80 million was due to be spent this year. Will the right hon. Lady confirm that the £80 million for this year is secure, and that she and her colleagues will honour the £230 million commitment over the coming four years?

Does the Minister agree that it is important that police spend their time actually investigating crime, not policing thought? Does she agree that the guidelines need to be changed, so that police spend time investigating

only real crimes, and investigate non-crimes only when there is a real and imminent risk of criminality? That would mean a change to the guidelines. Will she make that change?

On the reform programme, we need to see the details of course, but will the Minister confirm that no money will be taken away from local police forces? Will she confirm that police and crime commissioners and chief constables will continue to be fully empowered? Finally, on police funding, she mentioned some numbers for next year's funding settlement. She will be aware that when I was Policing Minister, we arranged a £922 million increase in funding for frontline policing for this financial year, compared with last year. The numbers she talked about in her statement are much lower than that, so will she give a commitment that any funding increase for frontline policing that she brings forward in the police funding settlement will be at least as big as the one that I announced last year?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** This is the first opportunity I have had to welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new role as shadow Home Secretary, but I think he might be forgetting a few facts. As I recall, over the previous 14 years, the Conservative Government slashed policing by over 20,000 police officers, and many support staff as well. I acknowledge that the uplift programme was brought in at the end of their period in government, but they got rid of a lot of very experienced, good police officers. Also, just to remind him, we stood for election on a manifesto commitment to providing 13,000 additional police officers, PCSOs and specials as part of our neighbourhood policing guarantee.

I know that the right hon. Gentleman is very keen on technology. That was absolutely one of the things that he focused on. I have certainly taken up some of the issues that he was concerned about to do with live facial recognition, and I want that investment to continue. I think he is again forgetting a few things when he refers to the guidelines for non-crime hate incidents. As I recall, he was the Policing Minister who introduced those guidelines. I have listened to what he said, but I think he needs to remember what he actually did when he was the Policing Minister. I take the approach that this should be about common sense and consistency. His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services talked about the need for consistency and training; I will listen to what it has to say, rather than to the right hon. Gentleman's view on guidelines that he introduced. Many of the questions that he asks will form part of the consultative approach that we will adopt when our White Paper is laid before Parliament.

**Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): My constituents tell me that they are particularly worried about antisocial behaviour, and that they want guaranteed police patrols. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is what this Government intend to deliver?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I very much welcome that question from my hon. Friend and neighbour in Kingston upon Hull. He is absolutely right to say that the neighbourhood policing guarantee will include designated police officers, PCSOs and specials who will patrol neighbourhoods. There will be a named officer that people can go to if there are problems around antisocial behaviour. We will also bring forward respect orders,

which will deal with the people who are engaging most persistently in antisocial behaviour; they can stop them being in particular neighbourhoods or even put conditions on them—for example, if they have an alcohol problem, they may have to get treatment and help for that problem. But he is absolutely right to say that antisocial behaviour is a big issue for many of our constituents.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Dame Karen Bradley.

**Dame Karen Bradley** (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I welcome the Government's announcements on neighbourhood policing. We have already seen a real move in this direction in Staffordshire, under the leadership of the police, fire and crime commissioner, Ben Adams, and our chief constable Chris Noble, so I very much welcome what the Minister has said. She will know, however, that the National Audit Office has raised concerns about the experience of officers when it comes to neighbourhood policing. What work will she do to ensure that officers have the right degree of experience, so that their effectiveness at neighbourhood policing is maximised?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** Can I take this opportunity to welcome the new Chair of the Home Affairs Committee? Chairing it is one of the very best jobs in Parliament. On neighbourhood policing, I recognise that there is good practice around the country, with certain police forces doing it very well indeed, but she is absolutely right to say that we want to equip our neighbourhood police officers with the best training, to enable them to do a really good job for their communities. That is why we have already announced money for the College of Policing to engage with neighbourhood police officers and give them the training that they deserve, particularly in problem solving, because that is a really important part of the role that they will play in neighbourhoods.

**Lewis Atkinson** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): To deliver effective policing, we need reform, but police officers also need to feel that they have our support. Does the Minister agree that agreeing the recommendations of the pay review body is a key part of delivering that support? What view does she have about those, including Conservative Members, who would prefer not to agree those recommendations, and on the impact that would have on police morale?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to support our police officers in the work that they do to keep us all safe, day in, day out. He will know that this year we accepted the recommendations of the pay review body, and that additional funding was provided to police forces to pay for an increase in salaries. It is important that we continue to ensure that our police are properly remunerated for the difficult job that they do. The Home Secretary has made that clear in her support for police officers.

**Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): Farmers in my constituency tell me that they are often the victims of serious rural crime, including threats of physical violence, but do not usually bother to report it because they do not think our rural police forces are well enough resourced to give a full response. If that is happening across the country, presumably it means that

rural crime is seriously under-reported. What more does the Minister plan to do to resource our rural crime teams, and to give farmers and others living in rural areas reassurance that they can and should report crime?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** The hon. Lady is exactly right. We need to make sure that when crime happens, it is reported. That is absolutely vital. As I said in my opening remarks, for too long people have felt that it is not worth reporting a crime because no one will come and nothing will be done. Our neighbourhood policing guarantee is not just about urban areas; it also covers rural areas, and we want rural communities to have the support that they need from police, PCSOs and specials. I am also responsible for rural crime, and I know that there is a range of issues that we need to look at again, including the theft of agricultural machinery; that is an area that I am particularly focused on.

**Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Just last night, Guisborough Town FC in my constituency suffered a break-in and burglary. I am grateful to Cleveland police for responding, and for meeting me this morning to update me on the situation, but there simply are not enough of them on the streets. Can the Minister give me an assurance that this Government will prioritise frontline, visible, neighbourhood community policing once again?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** Yes, I can. I pay tribute to Cleveland police, which has made great progress in recent times.

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): Will the Minister include references to fraud in her White Paper? Action Fraud, which would be more accurately described as "Inaction Fraud," is presiding over a complete failure to do anything, particularly about fraud against online retailers. Can we ensure that action is taken to help victims of fraud?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I reassure the hon. Gentleman that my noble Friend Lord Hanson, the Lords Minister, is looking at this. I gently point out that, in relation to fraud, we are having to deal with our inheritance from the previous Administration. We will now look at some of the problems with Action Fraud that they did not deal with.

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): The latest crime figures show that shoplifting has shot up to a 20-year high, knife crime has risen yet again and violence against women and girls remains shamefully and persistently high. Does the Minister agree that this shows the last Tory Government's disgraceful dereliction on law and order?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** My hon. Friend puts it well. This is why our safer streets mission has the ambitious aim to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade, to halve knife crime over the next decade, to restore neighbourhood policing and to restore confidence in the criminal justice system.

**Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for proper neighbourhood policing, so we welcome this announcement. Sadly, I have heard at first hand the concern and fear of one community in Dartmouth, following a police decision



[*Caroline Voaden*]

to redeploy a local sergeant who had spent a couple of years building positive relationships and trust with the local community, particularly on antisocial behaviour and drug dealing. Can the Minister clarify how the neighbourhood policing guarantee will be implemented and how the Home Office plans to ensure that communities have consistent and long-term access to a known, named officer who will remain in the community?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I gently point out that the Liberal Democrats were part of the coalition Government, and that through those years of austerity, we saw major cuts to police officers, including neighbourhood police officers. However, I take her point. That is why we have the neighbourhood policing guarantee, and it is why we will have 13,000 additional police officers, PCSOs and specials. People will be able to go to a named police officer if they have problems in their area, as she requests. As I said earlier, we want to make sure that neighbourhood police officers are properly trained and that this is seen as a very important part of policing, so that officers want to stay in neighbourhood policing for longer.

**Connor Naismith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): My constituents in Nantwich often report experiencing unacceptable antisocial behaviour at night, particularly linked to the night-time economy, so I welcome the Government's plan to introduce zero-tolerance zones and respect orders to get a grip of the antisocial behaviour that the last Government allowed to run out of control. Will the Minister say a little more about how this will help my constituents?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** All Members will know that antisocial behaviour can blight communities and can cause real problems to individuals and families. This week is Antisocial Behaviour Awareness Week, and I was struck by Resolve's statistic that one in seven householders is thinking about moving because of antisocial behaviour. That is really shocking, and our respect orders and neighbourhood policing reforms will start to address the antisocial behaviour that has blighted many of our communities for too long.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister has outlined the lack of confidence in police services across the United Kingdom because of the failure to deal with real crimes such as burglary, shoplifting and antisocial behaviour. At the same time, we learn that three police forces have spent a year investigating a tweet by a columnist after a report from someone in Holland. Surely, if there is to be reform, one thing we should do is tell the police that they are no longer the thought police. They are meant to be dealing with crime. If that means changing the bad law introduced by the last Government, will the Minister make sure it is done so that we do not have any more of this nonsense?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** The right hon. Gentleman is right that this Government are prioritising the crimes that affect communities and individuals, such as the increasing antisocial behaviour, threats and knife-enabled robbery. Those are the things that people care about, and those are the things that our safer streets mission is designed to deal with.

In answer to the right hon. Gentleman's question, it is worth reflecting that the provisions on non-crime hate incidents came out of the Macpherson inquiry following the murder of Stephen Lawrence. That recommendation was about providing an intelligence picture for police officers. It may not be a crime, but the intelligence picture might benefit from knowing about it. It is worth reflecting on that. Of course, I want consistency and common sense in such investigations and, as I said earlier, the inspectorate has also highlighted the need for consistency and training because of the confusion about the guidelines issued by the previous Government. I am happy to look at that with the College of Policing to make sure we get it right, but there is a place for it in some circumstances.

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): Residents living around Wilmot Park in west Dartford continue to be plagued by antisocial behaviour, including vandalism, the use of motorbikes in green spaces, noise and threatening behaviour. As part of their safer streets mission, will the Government use police reform to ensure that such crimes are prioritised in Dartford and across the country?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I want the police to be getting on with this now, and they have powers they can use to deal with antisocial behaviour, but we want to make sure they have additional officers through the neighbourhood policing guarantee to ensure that they can deal with antisocial behaviour in communities. We have been very clear that the police will be given additional powers to make sure they can seize and destroy the motorbikes and vehicles that are causing nuisance to communities through antisocial behaviour.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Having worked with the right hon. Lady on Committees over a number of years, I am delighted to congratulate her on her appointment. In that spirit, I will make what I think is a helpful suggestion about non-crime hate incidents. Clearly, chief constables have huge discretion over how much effort they put into investigating local crime and non-crime incidents of the sort that she says have a place in the spectrum. Could she perhaps require chief constables to report back to her Department on how many hours their forces spend investigating crime incidents and non-crime incidents? It appears that tens of thousands of non-crime incidents are being investigated every year.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. It has been a great pleasure to work with him on various Committees over the years. He is correct that this is an operational matter. It is for chief constables to decide how they use the resources available to them. My understanding is that very little time is actually spent on non-crime hate incidents, but I will check that with His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary.

**Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): Coming from a policing family, and having served with the National Crime Agency, I am immensely proud of British policing. However, I am equally devastated at the decline overseen by the Conservatives. Can the Minister outline what we are doing to rebuild British policing and return it to being the best in the world?



**Dame Diana Johnson:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his service. We will all benefit from having him in the House, sharing his experience and knowledge. The police reform agenda, as set out in the Home Secretary's speech and the written ministerial statement yesterday, is about resetting that relationship with the police. We want to work with the police. This is not about doing things to the police, but about working collectively to get the very best police service for this country, for today, tomorrow and the years ahead.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): My residents in Boston and Skegness want the police on the streets, preventing antisocial behaviour and crime. They do not want our valuable police resources wasted on monitoring tweets for non-crime hate incidents, threatening and bullying residents, and then that record remaining on a database, which can prevent people from getting a job in the future. It is a complete waste of time. Will the Minister and the Home Office scrap those guidelines as an unnecessary use of valuable time and resources?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** This Government have been very clear about their priorities on policing. In our safer streets mission, we have set out that we will halve violence against women and girls and knife crime over the next decade, we will restore public confidence in the criminal justice system, particularly in the police, and we will introduce neighbourhood policing, which we know to be the bedrock of policing in this country and the area in which most people want to see investment. Those are our priorities, as the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have said, and that is where the focus and attention of the police needs to be.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): For too long, far too many of my towns and villages have had to endure rising levels of antisocial behaviour, such as people riding unsafe bikes through village centres, and an epidemic of shoplifting, including at my local Morrisons, whose staff I met last month. I am working closely with our local police and crime commissioner, John Tizard, to push for a more robust police response. What reassurances can the Minister give my constituents that our new strategy will ensure that a far greater priority is given to such crimes, and that those crimes will not be tolerated, as they seem to have been far too often in the past?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this important area. This Government are committed to dealing with shop thefts and attacks on retail workers, and we will bring forward legislation in due course. Our safer streets mission focuses on high streets, town centres and communities, so that people feel safe, there is a police presence and antisocial behaviour is not tolerated.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Week in, week out, police officers from my constituency are extracted to go and police protests and events in central London. My constituents and I are proud to live in our great capital city and in a democracy where the right to protest is cherished. However, under the Conservatives, since 2015, the capital city grant has been cut by 17% in real terms. That is the money that should be used to police such protests, not community policing resources,

which is what the Metropolitan Police Commissioner is having to draw on. Will the Minister review the capital city grant, so that my constituents can see a bobby on the beat again?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** The hon. Lady will know that announcements about the provisional police settlement will be made in December in this House. Discussions are under way about exactly the points she raises. I note what she says about the levels of abstraction, which are a concern, but this Government are committed to the 13,000 additional police officers, PCSOs and specials in our neighbourhoods. The Metropolitan police area will benefit from that, as will every other police area.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): When I spend time canvassing in my constituency of Harlow, as I often do, residents tell me that they do not see community police officers any more. In 2010, we had over 30 PCSOs for the whole of Harlow, but we now have four. Will the Minister set out how the safer streets mission will make residents in Harlow feel safer?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** It is worth reflecting on the fact that the number of PCSOs has halved in the past 14 years, and the number of specials has reduced by two thirds. Those are shocking figures. We want to ensure that we use PCSOs, because they police neighbourhoods in such a valuable way. Also, I am personally committed to making sure that we see more specials on the beat. People who stand up for the local community and do such work on a voluntary basis are to be commended. I hope that across the House we would all support an extension to the work of specials.

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): Cambridgeshire constabulary is one of the most poorly funded in the country under the current police allocation formula, which is based on population data from 2012. Cambridgeshire has grown vastly since then and is projected to grow by nearly 20% in the next decade. In order to fulfil the Government's pledges and ensure neighbourhood officers are not overstretched under her plans, will the Policing Minister commit to reviewing the formula before the forthcoming announcement of the 2025-26 police funding settlement, so that Cambridgeshire receives its fair share of the £0.5 billion increase? Will she explain how many officers, of the 13,000 she mentioned, each force will receive?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** The Home Secretary announced yesterday that there will be £0.5 billion of additional funding for policing next year, including money for the core grant and neighbourhood policing. The announcement about the 2025-26 police funding settlement will be made in December in this House, in the normal way.

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Antisocial behaviour, fly-tipping, off-road bikes and e-scooters racing along pavements and streets, and an epidemic of shoplifting are all issues raised time and again by my constituents across all wards of Portsmouth North. Does the Minister agree that we need police officers back on the beat in local communities, equipped with tougher powers to crack down on these crimes, to not only make the people of Portsmouth feel safer, but to get pride back in our communities?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** My hon. Friend puts her point incredibly well. That is why we have the safer streets mission, and why we will have those police officers, PCSOs and special constables back in our communities, policing for the vast majority of law-abiding citizens and dealing with the antisocial behaviour that has blighted communities for too long.

**David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): In 2012, I was run over by a car in the Netherlands. I woke up in hospital several days later, with some fairly severe injuries. I am thankful that the resulting police investigation was swift and efficient. Unfortunately, that is not the case for such incidents in the UK, because forensic collision units across the country are facing severe challenges in preparing cases, resulting in large delays to trials and ultimately to justice, prolonging the agony for impacted families. What is the Department doing to help the police tackle those resourcing challenges and ensure road traffic collision cases come to a swifter conclusion?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I am sorry to hear about the accident that the hon. Gentleman suffered in 2012, and I hope he has made a full recovery. On his specific point, I will go away and ask my officials about that, and about what more we can do to ensure justice is done on road collisions and that cases go to court quickly.

**Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I am often contacted by businesses from across Gateshead Central and Whickham complaining about high street crime. A recent spate of crimes on Low Fell high street has left some businesses potentially having to close. With shop thefts up 40% in the past year alone, what will these very welcome measures do to lower crime on our high streets?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. High streets are the lifeblood of our local communities. We want to ensure they are as safe as possible, and that businesses are not suffering losses through shop thefts and assaults on their workers. Our package of measures will deal with antisocial behaviour, put in place the neighbourhood policing guarantee, allow new prosecutions under the legislation we will introduce about assaults on retail workers, and get rid of the £200 threshold for shop theft cases to go forward. One approach will not solve the problems, so we will ensure we have a whole package of measures to make high streets, neighbourhoods and communities safer and to allow businesses to thrive. We need businesses to thrive so that they can pay their taxes, and we can invest that money back into public services.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): Two years ago, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner said that 3,000 officers were not deployable for reasons of physical fitness, and 500 officers were not deployable for reasons of misconduct allegations: that is more than 10% of the Met's headcount. Will the Minister tell us the latest numbers? Does she plan to make it easier for chief constables, as they have requested, to fire underperforming officers?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I can write to the hon. Gentleman with the figures, but clearly, there have been issues with the Metropolitan police over the last 14 years and I know that the current commissioner has raised concerns about the procedures for getting rid of police officers.

**Nick Timothy:** You're in charge now.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I have been the Policing Minister for five months, compared with the 14 years that those on his side of the House were responsible for policing. I did not see any action then on dealing with the issues that he raises with me.

I can guarantee that this Government will be looking at the workforce and making sure that we recruit the right people into policing and vet police officers throughout their careers. Because of the shocking cases that we have seen—David Carrick and others—we will take action, which we set out in our manifesto, to have a workforce that is fit for purpose. I know the hon. Gentleman is very new in this place, but he needs to remember the legacy that his Government and his party delivered to us when we arrived in July.

**Mr Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Whenever I speak with residents, business leaders or their staff in my constituency, they all tell me the same thing. Whether it is the staff at Wortley ASDA who have to deal with persistent shoplifting, or the stallholders at Morley market who tell me that they have to deal with crime on the high street in Morley, they all tell me that the police do not turn up and that they never see police patrols in our communities any more. Can the Minister confirm that we will return to neighbourhood policing, that we will see police on our streets patrolling again and that we will have named police officers turn up when things go wrong?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is the experience that many Members of Parliament will encounter when they talk to their constituents, who feel that there is no point in reporting things because nothing will happen and no one will come. That is why the neighbourhood policing guarantee is so important. We will have those police officers, PCSOs and specials back on our streets. That visible presence will be there, so I can absolutely say that that is part of our safer streets mission and that is what we will deliver.

**Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): May I associate myself with the comments made by my hon. Friends the Members for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) and for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine), particularly in relation to things like rural crime, car racing, bike racing, threatening behaviour, burglary and shoplifting, and the frustration that people feel with the delays and lack of response and with things such as camera footage, which is taken every day, not being used? That frustration is, none the less, absolutely dwarfed by the frustration of the fact that the previous Avon and Somerset police and crime commissioner had 28.5 full-time equivalent members of staff and a massive budget. My constituents have no idea how that is justified when what they want is police officers. Can the Minister please make sure that her review actually includes getting a grip on what is happening in PCC offices?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** The hon. Lady will have an opportunity, when the White Paper is published, to make her and her constituents' views clear. Clearly, there will be questions around the different roles—the Home Secretary's role, the PCC role and chief constables'

operationally independent role—and that will be part of the discussion and debate around how we take forward the White Paper and the recommendations that come out of it.

**Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this urgent question on a subject that is on the minds of so many of my constituents. Stalking is a form of psychological violence that remains severely underreported. I have met constituents who are victims of stalking, and they have shared with me the lack of support they feel they receive from the Metropolitan police. They live in constant terror and anxiety, even after taking the brave step of reporting the offences. Will the Minister outline what steps her Department is taking to work with the Metropolitan police to ensure that officers receive proper training to identify stalking, support and protect victims and take robust action against perpetrators?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman's question; I am really concerned to hear what he is saying. The safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), is dealing with the issue of stalking and I know she feels very strongly about that. It might be helpful if the hon. Gentleman wrote to her, and I will certainly raise the matter with her. We may need to feed in the experiences the hon. Gentleman mentions to make sure the Metropolitan police are doing everything they need to to support victims of stalking who bravely come forward.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to see the right hon. Lady—she has moved from the Back Benches to the Front Bench and is doing equally good work.

I welcome the safer streets programme and the enhancement of community policing. Can the Minister outline how there can be a UK-wide drive in addressing the money lending and drug warfare that blights all our communities throughout the United Kingdom? I am thinking of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland and criminal gangs in the UK mainland that work together and share their criminal activities. What opportunity will there be within police reform to discuss how we can work alongside the Justice Minister in Northern Ireland and the Police Service of Northern Ireland? We can do better together.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** It is always a pleasure to be questioned by the hon. Member. When I chaired the Home Affairs Committee, we produced a report on drugs and we went to look at drug problems in Belfast and in Northern Ireland. I was struck by the particular issues there around the involvement of paramilitaries. It would be helpful if the hon. Gentleman and I could have a conversation about what more we can do on that issue when we look at the broader safer streets mission.

## Asylum Seekers: Hotel Accommodation

1.26 pm

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement on the Government's decision to recommence the use of hotels as accommodation for asylum seekers.

**The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle):** This Government inherited an asylum system under unprecedented strain, with many thousands stuck in a backlog without their asylum claims processed. The Home Secretary has taken immediate action to restart asylum processing and scrap the unworkable Rwanda policy, which will save an estimated £4 billion for the taxpayer over the next two years. We remain absolutely committed to ending the use of hotels for asylum seekers and continue to identify a range of accommodation options to minimise the use of hotels and ensure better use of public money, while maintaining sufficient accommodation to meet demand.

In accordance with the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Home Office has a statutory obligation to provide destitute asylum seekers with accommodation and subsistence support while their application for asylum is being considered. We are committed to ensuring that destitute asylum seekers are housed in safe, secure and suitable accommodation and that they are treated with dignity while their asylum claim is considered. We continue to work closely with local authorities and key stakeholders, building on lessons learned in terms of asylum accommodation stand-up and management.

Hotels are not a permanent solution, but a necessary temporary step in keeping the system under control and ensuring it does not descend into chaos. We will restore order to the asylum system so it operates swiftly, firmly and fairly. As we progress with that, it is right that we deliver on our legal responsibilities and ensure people are not left destitute. Ultimately, we will be able to tackle irregular migration and bring the cost of the system down by billions of pounds. It remains our ambition to exit hotels; however, in the nearest future, they remain key to delivering on our legal responsibilities in ensuring people are not left destitute.

**Sir Gavin Williamson:** May I record my appreciation for securing this urgent question, Madam Deputy Speaker?

My constituents have had the devastating news that the Roman Way hotel is to be stood up to house asylum seekers. This was after it had been closed last year. Such a move has a significant impact not just on my constituents, but in Cannock more generally. We have seen 19,326 people cross the channel since Labour came to power, which is 19% up on the same period last year. This must be seen in the context of Labour's manifesto pledge in July to end the use of hotels for asylum seekers.

Members can imagine the devastation that so many constituents across the country are feeling when they see these hotels being brought back into use, breaking one of Labour's manifesto pledges. There is also a total lack of transparency. There is no consultation with local authorities. This is a diktat that those authorities receive, with no support and no help, and it is only news organisations such as GB News that are shining a light on it.



[Sir Gavin Williamson]

Will the Minister provide a list to the House of Commons, detailing all the hotels that have been stepped up to provide accommodation for asylum seekers since Labour came to power? And will she commit to continuing to update that list? What is the estimated cost of reopening these hotels? What has changed so drastically that has caused Labour to abandon a manifesto pledge so quickly? Considering that there is a correlation between the removal of a deterrent effect, which our party had put in place, and a rise in crossings, what will the Government do to provide a credible deterrent going forward? Finally, will the Minister commit to ceasing to use the Roman Way Hotel in my constituency, and will she also commit to not putting the Hatherton House hotel in Penkridge into use?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** As a senior member of the last few Administrations, the right hon. Gentleman will know that we inherited an asylum system that had been ground to a standstill by the previous Government's pursuit of the Rwanda policy, which was doomed to failure. They spent £700 million over two years to send four volunteers to Rwanda. Conservative Members claim that the Rwanda scheme was somehow a deterrent, but from the day that it was announced to the day that it was scrapped 83,500 people crossed the channel in small boats. If the right hon. Gentleman thinks that that is the definition of a deterrent, I think he needs to look it up in a dictionary. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member talks about a 19% increase in channel boat crossings since Labour came to power, but in the first six months of this year when the Rwanda scheme was up and running and apparently about to start at any minute, there was an 18% increase in channel crossings. Again, the Rwanda scheme was an expensive distraction, not a deterrent.

The right hon. Gentleman asks whether we will produce a list of hotels that are currently in use. He will know that, when he was in government, hotel use peaked at more than 400. I can tell him that, currently, there are 220 hotels in use. At the time of the election, there were 213 hotels in use, but since July seven hotels have shut and 14 have opened, which has created a net increase of seven.

**Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) for securing this question. Under the previous Government, when the current shadow Home Secretary was in the Home Office, two hotels in my constituency were opened. There was no notification to the local authority and no consultation. This is another example of the Conservative party crying over the mess that they made and the attempt that this Government are making to clear it up. Does the Minister agree that we will smash the criminal gangs and stop those channel crossings, and that the carping from Conservative Members demonstrates that they have learned nothing since their election defeat?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I strongly agree with my hon. Friend: we inherited a system that was at a standstill. There was a backlog of 90,000 cases involving 116,000 people, and the law would not allow them to be processed. We have restarted processing. We are gearing up the asylum system, so that we can get throughput in

the system, and ultimately exit the hotels and start using a more cost-effective system. I agree with my hon. Friend that the carping by Conservative Members, who created the backlogs and the mess that we are having to deal with, is a bit rich.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) on securing this urgent question. He is right to raise this issue. As he said, Labour promised in its manifesto to end the use of hotels, yet the Minister has just admitted at the Dispatch Box that, far from ending the use of hotels, the Government are in fact opening up even more. She has just admitted to 14. Perhaps it should come as no surprise now that, once again, Labour is doing the precise opposite to what it promised in its manifesto.

When the Conservatives were in government, they were in fact closing down hotels. Luckily, I have the figures in front of me. Between September last year and 30 June this year, the number of people in contingency accommodation, which is Home Office speak for hotels, went down by 47%—it went down—yet under this new Government it is going up. The Minister has told us how many hotels have opened up, will she tell us how many extra people are now in contingency accommodation, compared with 4 July? Will she also commit to always notifying Members of Parliament in advance—at least two weeks in advance—that a hotel will be opening in their constituency?

We all know the cause of this problem. It is the illegal and dangerous channel crossings. I am afraid the position has got even worse since the figures my right hon. Friend quoted were drawn up. Since the election, 19,988 people have crossed the channel. That is a 23% increase on the same period last year, and it is a 66% increase on the same period immediately before the election. Why have these numbers of people illegally crossing the channel gone up? The National Crime Agency has told us that we need a deterrent—that we cannot police our way out of this. Even Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, has said that European member states should look at offshore processing. We saw a deterrent system work in Australia, yet Labour scrapped the Rwanda deterrent before it had even started. The first flight had not taken off and that is why the deterrent effect had not commenced. Will the Minister follow Ursula von der Leyen's advice? Will she emulate the Australians and reinstate the scheme?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** That was quite a rant. It made certain assumptions that are completely untrue, including that the Rwanda scheme would have worked. We already know that it cost £700 million to send four volunteers to Rwanda. The Conservative party was planning to spend £175,000 per person sent to Rwanda, and it had not managed to send anyone to Rwanda. Had the Conservatives put aside the money, going into billions of pounds, to pay this £175,000 per person sent to Rwanda? No, they had not. No money was set aside. What we inherited was a system where no processing was going on—well, fewer than 1,000 asylum cases a month were being processed. We are now processing up to 10,000 asylum cases a month.



The right hon. Gentleman knows, because he was a Home Office Minister, that there are backlogs and lags between the first decision in processing and all the potential appeals. We cannot exit people from the asylum estate until they have a final decision. We inherited backlogs of more than two years in the tribunal system because the Conservatives did not fund it properly. In the last period, we have returned nearly 10,000 people, which is nearly a 20% increase on the numbers returned last year. We are working on making the asylum system fit for purpose. We inherited an unholy mess from the Conservatives.

**Mr Connor Rand** (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): I know that the Government understand that using hotels to house asylum seekers is bad for communities, for the taxpayer, and ultimately for those seeking asylum themselves. Conservative Members broke our asylum system and now wash their hands of the consequences. Will the Minister outline the progress that the Government are making on clearing the backlog that the Conservatives created, so that we can stand down hotels, including by prioritising the processing of those housed in the Cresta Court hotel in my constituency?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** We are prioritising getting the system up and running again so that we can have throughput in our asylum accommodation estate. The fact that the system had ground to a complete halt when we came into government, with 90,000 unprocessed cases, has meant that there have been delays in getting it up and running. I explained to the House that we have gone from making 1,000 asylum decisions a month to 10,000. The system is beginning to get flow-through, and as that happens, we will exit from hotels. We have had to have a small increase. We have been in power four months. The manifesto did not say that we would end the use of hotels in four months. When the Conservatives were in power, more than 400 hotels were in use at its height, and they did not give any MP two weeks' notice that those hotels were opening.

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

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): While an asylum seeker waits months or even years in a hotel for a decision on their claim, they are trapped in limbo. They are unable to work and are forced to depend on Government funds. That benefits no one—not the asylum seekers, who want to get on and start rebuilding their lives, and not taxpayers, who foot the bill. That is before I mention our local councils, which are left to pick up the pieces.

To end the use of hotels, tackling the backlog that ballooned on the previous Government's watch must be part of the solution, but we can also reduce the demand for Government accommodation by allowing asylum seekers to support themselves and contribute to the economy—something that the Home Office has recognised will not act as a pull factor for asylum seekers. Will the Minister finally scrap the ban on asylum seekers working and paying their fair share as doctors or dentists if they have been waiting three months or longer for a decision on their claim? Will she commit to providing local councils with the resources that they need—both funding and clear guidance—to provide proper support for asylum seekers and the local communities hosting these hotels?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I do not agree that allowing asylum seekers to work while their claim is being considered will not be a pull factor. The way to deal with this issue is to have a fast, fair and efficient asylum system. We are looking at how we can redesign it, and at what we can do to deal with the huge backlogs that we inherited, not least in the tribunal system when there are appeals. We need a much better end-to-end system that is fair and efficient. That will mitigate any of the issues that the hon. Lady raises with respect to asylum seekers not being allowed to work. Were that restriction to be lifted, I believe that it would be a huge pull factor, which would have potentially serious consequences.

**Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) on securing this urgent question on a matter that the Home Affairs Committee is looking at, but I am astonished that he wants to draw attention to the Conservatives' legacy in this area. In 2019-20, the Home Office was spending £17,000 per asylum seeker per year on accommodation; by 2023-24, it was spending £47,000 per asylum seeker per year. At that point, it stopped taking decisions, so the number could only grow as the UK taxpayer paid for asylum seekers to stay in hotel accommodation. Does the Minister agree that the correct way to deal with the issue is to seriously address the systemic problems in the immigration system, such as the lack of any decisions being taken, and not ridiculous gimmicks such as wave machines and deterrents for four people?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I agree that it is about doing the day job effectively and efficiently, and if it cannot be done effectively and efficiently, redesigning it so that it can be, rather than having huge rows with the international community, threatening to leave the European convention on human rights, and setting up a parallel scheme that was not agreed by anybody, which spent vast amounts of money and ground the system to a halt. That is not the way to achieve success in this area. Considering the use of a wave machine to somehow send boats back to France just about sums up the reality of the Conservatives' attitude to what is a difficult situation.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): The Prime Minister has pledged to smash the gangs, and the Minister appears to be very confident in her position, so can she tell the House which metric we should use to judge whether the gangs have been smashed and the channel crossings ended, and by what date that will happen?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** The Conservative party allowed—

**Nick Timothy:** Can you answer the question?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I will answer in my own way. The Conservative party allowed channel crossings to be industrialised. We are now facing a very sophisticated set of international supply chains that need international co-operation to be taken down and disrupted. We have established the border security command, we have announced the investment of £150 million, and we are getting 100 additional investigators to look at this matter. We managed to achieve a very significant arrest of an offender just the other week, which will begin to degrade

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

the capacity of international organised criminal gangs to smuggle people on to our shores. The hon. Gentleman will see when the numbers start to go down, as will the rest of us.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): The Minister has inherited an incredible mess. Reportedly, £3.6 billion of overseas aid will be spent on refugees and asylum seekers in this country this year, but simply ending the use of hotels will not solve some of the problems that the system is causing in our communities. A lot of the private providers of asylum accommodation buy up properties in the most deprived parts of cities. I think that the Government's biggest challenge is to rebuild trust with the public. I ask her to consider the difference between the Homes for Ukraine system of housing people and the system of allowing big corporates and profiteering companies to house asylum seekers, and to think about how we involve civil society and our communities in the way we respond to the needs of asylum seekers.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** My hon. Friend will be comforted to know that I am thinking of precisely those things.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I do not envy the hon. Lady in her job. Does she agree that no amount of hotel accommodation will ever suffice as long as there is no effective way of preventing large numbers of people from coming into this country without permission? As a form of interception near the French coast will probably be the only deterrent, will she at least keep open the possibility of negotiations with France as to how we could work together to do that?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** We have a relatively new Government in France just bedding in. I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we are working closely with them to see how we can strengthen and deepen our co-operation and partnership.

**Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) who raised the urgent question appears to be suffering from some memory loss. Under the Conservative Government, we saw 130,000 small boat crossings and record backlogs at the Home Office. The Conservatives opened 400 hotels—that is, 21,000 places costing £8 million per day to the taxpayer. Does the Minister recall him raising that issue under the previous Government?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** No, I do not. I noticed the revelations at the weekend about why the Conservatives decided to call the election earlier than some of us had perhaps thought. One reason set out in Tim Shipman's book "Out" was that illegal migration was a problem, "with a new armada of small boats predicted and the issue of whether they would be able to get a repatriation flight to Rwanda in the air before polling day."

They evidently decided that they could not. We are now hearing this complete fiction from Conservative Members that somehow the Rwanda scheme was just about to work before we scrapped it, when they had spent £700 million on an increasingly futile and ridiculous attempt to get the scheme off the ground.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Here we go again with this new Labour Government simply copying and aping the failed and disastrous policies of the Conservative Government on hotel accommodation, while engaging in this grotesque competition to see who can sound the hardest on asylum seekers. Why not be bold and imaginative? Many of these asylum seekers are highly educated, with skills that could be deployed in communities up and down the United Kingdom. The ridiculous answer that the Minister gave to the Liberal Democrats about the UK being a pull to asylum seekers is simply nonsense, and she knows that with the tens of thousands coming to our shores right now. Why not get them usefully employed instead of leaving them to rot in hotels across the UK?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** We certainly want those who gain status to be usefully employed, and my part of the system is ensuring that we get those asylum decisions up and running as fast as possible. Unfortunately, we have inherited a difficult situation, which we are working hard to resolve. Once someone has gained status in this country, of course they are able to work, so we have to get the system working faster.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, two hotels were opened under the previous Conservative Government, and they are still there, so I find the new concern from Conservative Members slightly disconcerting. Although I accept what the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) says about this now being the Labour Government's problem, I am certain that Conservative Members do not want to publicly defend their appalling legacy, we need a little less from them. The question I put to the Minister—*[Interruption.]* That is how it works here: we ask a question and wait for the answer. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), can keep quiet.

Schools in my constituency say that accessing children in those hotels for educational welfare visits or safeguarding checks is proving more and more difficult because the providers do not understand their responsibilities. I encourage the Minister to speak to her counterparts in the Department for Education and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that those necessary checks to keep children safe can be done unimpeded.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** Since we came into government, we have done much more to co-operate across Departments, and I will certainly take that issue up with my opposite numbers in the Department for Education and MHCLG.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Two hotels in my constituency of East Londonderry are being used, and we have problems enough trying to provide good-quality hotels, with Royal Portrush coming up next year. We need to see a gradual, continuous reduction in hotel accommodation being used for this purpose. Will the Minister address that and try to show some sense of direction on when that will be achieved?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** We are processing asylum claims, which were at a standstill when we came into government, not least those that are extant in Northern Ireland. I hope that will lead to a process where we get throughput in the system and we begin to exit hotels.

**Jo White** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's informing the House that return figures are now at nearly 10,000, which is up 1,000 from last week. May I ask on behalf of my constituents how we can make returns even faster?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** For the integrity of any asylum system, it is important that a person who is not granted asylum recognises that they do not have the right to stay in the country. Hopefully they will leave voluntarily; if not, they will be removed. Immigration enforcement, which operates out of the Home Office, is focused on increasing total returns. As I said, they are up 19% on the same period last year, and we intend to double down and carry on.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): In Boston and Skegness, we want the use of hotels by asylum seekers to stop, as is the case across the country. Under the previous Labour Government 20 years ago, processes and applications were dealt with within three to four weeks, including appeals, and only about 20% of applications were granted asylum. When will the Minister and the Home Office get back to the sensible workmanlike processes that worked 20 years ago?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** We are working on it, but, as the hon. Gentleman knows, we have inherited a huge mess with large backlogs that are not easy to clear.

**Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), who has eloquently described how it used to work under the previous Labour Government. In fact, on the last day of 2010, the number of people on an asylum waiting list was around 14,000. In June this year, the asylum caseload was 224,000. That is 16 times higher. The brass neck, frankly, of Conservative Members to come here and criticise us is genuinely breathtaking. Given that we have gotten three of the largest deportation flights in British history off the ground in four months, does the Minister agree that although there is far more to do, the plan is working?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** Yes, but it is tough and difficult, and to be successful, it requires international co-operation across borders operationally, politically and diplomatically, and we are doing that.

**Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): Yesterday the Minister finally replied to my letter after my Datchet constituents were given next to no notice about single adult males being housed at the Manor hotel. She said the numbers housed there could reach as high as 85 people, and she gave no indication about how long they would be there, in breach of her manifesto commitment. Will she now give my constituents a concrete timetable for when the misuse of the Manor hotel will end?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** Our manifesto commitment was not to close all asylum hotels within four months of being elected.

**Mr Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): It is truly astonishing to hear the Conservatives come here today to defend their Rwanda policy—£700 million spent on four deportees, or £175 million each. They could have purchased a five-star hotel for

each of them. Surely the Minister agrees that the money is far better spent on intelligence, enforcement and, of course, processing, to get the backlog that we inherited down.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I certainly do agree.

**Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): I am sure that the vast majority of Members accept that the new Government have inherited a complete and utter shambles of an asylum system, and are having to clear up another area of Tory mess. Part of that clearing up will involve sorting out and processing asylum applications promptly, so will the Minister give us more insight on how she is doing that? My area had asylum hotels imposed upon it by the last Conservative Government. How will the Government avoid principal holiday accommodation areas taking further such hotels?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** We certainly are having to get the system back up and running from a virtual standing start, as the hon. Gentleman rightly points out. That means that we have been able, as I said, to go up from processing only 1,000 asylum claims a month to nearly 10,000 a month. Those who have gone through the whole system and have received a grant, for example, need then to exit our asylum accommodation. That allows us to backfill and, in the end, to exit hotels. However, that is not an instant solution; the system has ground to a halt and we must redeploy resource to get it up and running again.

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): It is worth remembering that when this Government came into office, we were in the middle of the worst year ever for small boat crossings—the number of crossings was 6% higher than in 2022, the previous record year. That, I am afraid, was the legacy of chaos and failure that the Conservative party left behind. There is still a long way to go in tackling the crossings, but does the Minister welcome the fact that, so far, total arrivals this year are 20% down on 2022?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I welcome any progress, but I also recognise the seasonality of arrivals. Unlike the last Government, I am not here to tell the House that there are any quick or easy solutions to this difficult problem. We are getting the system up and running, we have created the border security command to start disrupting and degrading the gangs that are smuggling people across the channel, and we will assert the right of the rule of law to exist, and get our asylum system working, so that we can stop those dangerous crossings.

However, I cannot stand here and say that a magic wand that can easily be waved. It will take hard cross-jurisdictional and cross-country work, and that is what the border security commander has been appointed to do. That is what the extra £150 million of resource given to that job is there to do. That is what our operational and National Crime Agency people are there to do and are doing.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): We have heard today that more than 19,000 illegals have come in on small boats since the Government came into office. Does the Minister have any figures on the influx in the United Kingdom of illegals and others from the Republic of Ireland, where there are no checks? On the question of hotels, how can my constituents judge her party's



[Jim Allister]

manifesto pledge to reduce the number of hotels? To help them do that, will she undertake to publish, on a monthly or bi-monthly basis, the number of hotels in use in each constituency and the number of illegals accommodated in them?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** No. The previous Government did not do that either, for safeguarding and public safety reasons, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

**Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): It is rather galling for the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) to protest about a hotel in his constituency being used. That is clearly the result of a backlog created by the Conservatives when in government, as they wasted hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on gimmicks that they knew would never work. Surely my hon. Friend agrees that the right answer is better and faster processing. That is fairer for those seeking asylum, fairer for those in communities where hotels are being used for asylum accommodation, and fairer for the taxpayer.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I agree. Of course, the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) knows only too well that the same hotel was open from 21 November 2022 to 8 February 2024, and he did not complain about it in the House then.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline the safety procedures in place to ensure that there is additional community policing in the areas around the hotels, as literally hundreds of single men are descending on small hotels and communities? That is a safety issue, and all our constituents across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland deserve to have that reassurance.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** There is a safeguarding and safety issue going in both directions. I see reports of asylum seeker service users being attacked and injured, as well as of attacks in the other direction in a small number of cases. We always liaise with the local police and local authorities. We take an intelligence-led approach to see whether there is outside agitation or difficulty, and we are in constant contact with local services and our service providers to ensure the safety of service users and local populations.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement, and I am responding to it in the context of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I can only agree with her on Rwanda. Not only was that scheme an inhumane shambles, but it has brought shame and ridicule to our country, and I am glad to see the back of it. I welcome her commitment to bringing dignity and respect to the immigration system, and her acceptance that the way in which the hotels have been operated is a big part of that.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's recent "Destitution by Design" report, which was authored by Professor Beth Watts-Cobbe, a researcher at the Institute for Social Policy, Housing, Equalities Research in my constituency, makes absolutely clear the human impact of the so-called hostile immigration policy operated by the previous Government on real people in our country. Is the Minister aware of that report, and if not, will she commit herself or one of her staff to speaking to Professor Watts-Cobbe about its findings?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I am happy to check out the report, and I will write to my hon. Friend.

**Sam Carling** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for coming to the House to set out the Government's measures to deal with this issue. I share my colleagues' amazement about the new-found concern of Conservative Members—[*Interruption.*] I am not sure why the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) is heckling. This time last year, under the Conservative Government, we had more than 400 hotels and more than 21,000 hotel rooms in use for asylum seekers, and we were spending £8 million a day on hotels. Does the Minister agree that although the Conservatives were apparently happy with that, this Labour Government are not, and we are taking steps to deal with their mess?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I thank my hon. Friend for his observations. Clearly, we begin from the situation that we found when we came into office. In this case, the system was in chaos, with a Rwanda scheme that was an unworkable and massively expensive distraction, which meant that no processing of any of the asylum claims made from March 2023 was happening. We have a huge backlog. We have had to switch the system, and divert resources from a failed Rwanda scheme into processing and the border security command, so that we can deal with the causes of the problem, rather than pretending that it does not exist.



## Defence Programmes Developments

2.9 pm

**The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):** With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on defence programmes developments.

I have now been Secretary of State for four months, and it is an honour and a privilege to have this job. Every day I meet staff from the military, the civil service and industry who are totally inspiring and dedicated to keeping this country safe, often unseen and unheard by us and by the public. We are proud of their professionalism and thank them for everything that they do.

This is a new Government getting on with delivering for defence. We have stepped up support for Ukraine, signed the landmark Trinity House agreement with Germany, and given forces personnel the largest pay rise in more than 20 years. We have confirmed defence as a priority sector as part of the Government's industrial strategy, and this week we secured the Second Reading of the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill to improve service life. Labour is the party of defence, and we will make Britain better defended.

We know that these are serious times. We have war in Europe, conflict in the middle east and increasing global threats. Technology is rapidly changing the nature of warfare, as we see right now in Ukraine. Before the election, we knew that there were serious problems with defence—one previous Conservative Defence Secretary told the House that our armed forces have been “hollowed out and underfunded” over the last 14 years.

However, as I have told the House since taking office, the problems were even worse than we thought. The inheritance was dire: the state of the finances and the forces was often hidden from Parliament, with billion-pound black holes in defence plans, taxpayers' funds being wasted, and military morale down to record lows. That is why we are taking swift action to inject investment, get a grip on Ministry of Defence budgets and kick-start much-needed reforms to start fixing the foundations for UK defence. I will update the House on what we are doing.

First, I will mention investment. In July, the Chancellor exposed the £22 billion black hole at the heart of the Government's plans. There were hundreds of unfunded pressures this year and into the future. The first duty of the Government is to keep this country safe, which is why the Chancellor announced in the Budget that defence will receive a boost next year of nearly £3 billion to start to fix the foundations for our forces. The Chancellor also told the House that we will set a clear path to 2.5% of GDP on defence, which will be fully funded, unlike the Conservatives' unfunded pre-election gimmick, which was never built into Government finances. This is not just about how much we spend on defence; it is how we spend that counts. That is why we are conducting a strategic defence review at pace to assess the threats we face and the capabilities we will need in the future. That is also why I have introduced tight financial controls on the Department, including a £300 million reduction in planned consultancy spending. We are getting a grip on MOD budgets and investing in people and future technologies.

Secondly, I will mention kit and capabilities. For too long, our soldiers, sailors and aviators have been stuck with old, outdated equipment because Ministers would

not make the difficult decommissioning decisions. As technology advances at pace, we must move faster towards the future, so, with full backing from our service chiefs, I can confirm that six outdated military capabilities will be taken out of service. These decisions are set to save the MOD £150 million over the next two years and up to £500 million over five years—savings that will be retained in full in defence.

Alongside this statement, I have made a written ministerial statement outlining the detail of my decommissioning decisions. They include decisions to decommission HMS Northumberland, a frigate with structural damage that makes her simply uneconomical to repair; 46 Watchkeeper mark 1s, which are 14-year-old Army drones that technology has overtaken; and HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, landing ships effectively retired by previous Ministers but superficially kept on the books, at a cost of £9 million a year. They also include decisions to decommission 14 Chinooks, some more than 35 years old, which will be accelerated out of service; two Wave-class tankers, neither of which has been to sea for years; and 17 Puma helicopters, some of which have more than 50 years of flying. Their service will not be extended. I recognise that they will mean a lot to many who have sailed and flown in them during their deployments around the world. They have provided valuable capability over the years, but their work is done, and we must now look to the future. All current personnel will be redeployed or retrained; no one will be made redundant. As the First Sea Lord said about the retirements,

“The threat is changing so we must have the self-confidence to make the changes required”.

Of course, we should be in no doubt that the future of our Royal Marines and its elite force will be reinforced in the SDR.

These are common-sense decisions that previous Governments failed to take. They will secure better value for money for the taxpayer and better outcomes for the military. They are all backed by the chiefs and taken in consultation with strategic defence reviewers. Allies have been informed, and we have constant dialogue with NATO. Those will not be the last difficult decisions that I will have to make, given the defence inheritance that we were left with, but they will help us to get a grip on the finances, and give us greater scope to renew our forces as we look towards the strategic defence review and spending 2.5% of GDP on defence. I thank the chiefs for their determination to work with me on this.

Thirdly, I will mention reform. Defence reform has been of little interest to recent Defence Secretaries—it does not make headlines or advance careers—but the way that defence works must change to deal with the increasing and diversifying threats. I recently launched the biggest reform programme in defence for 50 years to create a stronger UK defence centre, secure better value for money and better outcomes for our armed forces, and better implement the strategic defence review. Central to a reformed defence will be our new, fully fledged national armaments director, whose recruitment is under way. The Chief of the Defence Staff will oversee a new military strategic headquarters, operating from the end of 2024, where he will formally command the individual service chiefs for the first time. He will be central in prioritising investment and spending between the services. The permanent secretary will lead a leaner Department with more policy muscle and influence. These reforms

[John Healey]

will ensure faster delivery, better integration and clearer accountability across defence to make our forces fit to fight in the future.

Finally, I will mention our people. This Government are putting defence people at the heart of our defence plans. We inherited a Conservative crisis in military recruitment and retention; targets have been missed every year for 14 years and morale is at a record low. We cannot fix those deep-set problems overnight, but Ministers are on a mission to lift military morale. We have awarded the forces the largest pay increase in more than 20 years, and I can announce that from April, I am introducing a new £30,000 retention payment for a cohort of tri-service aircraft engineers who sign up for an additional three years of service. It will be open to around 5,000 personnel in total. From January, we have a new £8,000 retention payment for Army personnel who have served for four years. That will support 4,000 personnel a year for three years—12,000 troops in total.

I have set out where we were, and where we are going. We are in a new era of rising global tensions, and we need a new era for UK defence. To achieve that, the Government are investing £3 billion extra next year and setting a clear path to 2.5%. We are driving far-reaching reform and fixing the foundations for our armed forces to make Britain better defended, strong at home and secure abroad.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the shadow Defence Secretary.

2.19 pm

**James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con):** We have heard it all today. The Secretary of State claims that Labour is the party of defence, when barely an hour and a half ago, Prime Minister's questions was taken by a Deputy Prime Minister who, along with the Foreign Secretary, voted against the renewal of Trident.

The Secretary of State talks about inheriting a financial black hole. I remind the House that in 2010, when the Conservative party last took office, the deficit was 10.3% of GDP and we were on the verge of bankruptcy. When Labour took office in July, the deficit was 4.4% of GDP. Had the deficit Labour inherited been the same as in 2010, it would have been £160 billion bigger—the same as the NHS budget in England last year—so we take no lectures on black holes. The fact is that Labour has refused to set a pathway to 2.5%, and now we see the consequences: cuts instead of a pathway. The Secretary of State says that his path to 2.5% will be fully funded, while describing our path to 2.5% as a gimmick. Our plan was funded by reducing the size of the civil service. That is not a gimmick; it is just something that Labour's union paymasters will not allow them to do.

The Secretary of State says that defence reform was of little interest to recent Defence Secretaries. If he is talking about Ben Wallace, he was the Defence Secretary who took the massive decision to provide battlefield weapons to Ukraine before Russia invaded it, and to provide it with Storm Shadow and Challenger 2. If he is talking about Grant Shapps, he gave me his 100% backing in delivering the integrated procurement model, a fundamental reform of defence procurement that was all about modernisation, and that accelerated our procurement of anti-drone lasers.

Having delivered a 9.7% pay rise for the most junior personnel in 2023, we welcome the retention payments. However, given the cuts relating to the Royal Navy and its staffing pressures, will retention payments be offered to non-aircraft engineers, and will the RAF and Navy also receive the £8,000 four-year retention bonus? If not, why not?

The Secretary of State says that we “superficially” kept Bulwark and Albion on the books. Yes, we placed them in extended readiness, but to be clear, I personally sought and received assurances from the Navy's leadership that in the event of a full-scale warfighting scenario in which the priority for the Navy was littoral capability, those ships could have been regenerated to a condition that enabled them to fight, and the crews could have been found. That is what the Navy's leadership confirmed. Permanently scrapping the landing ships means removing that capability entirely. What impact will that have on the operational effectiveness of the Royal Marines? The multi-role support ship is intended to fill the gap, but it is at least eight to nine years away. Is the Secretary of State still committed to MRSS, and if so, how many will he procure?

Turning to rotary, what will be the operational impact in the immediate term of the Puma and Chinook decisions, and what will be the cost of the commercial solution that the Secretary of State will use to fill the capability gap in Brunei and Cyprus? As for the Conservatives' record on rotary, the Secretary of State knows that we secured £320 million of savings by renegotiating the Chinook extended range procurement, and that I personally commenced the new medium helicopter competition. On the new medium helicopter, I insisted that the procurement should have strong scoring for maintaining skilled rotary work in the UK, and for exportability, to sustain that work. Can the Secretary of State confirm that he will not change the competition, and that he is still committed to procuring the new medium helicopter without delay? Will the NMH come into service before those Pumas are retired?

On Watchkeeper, as the Minister who launched the MOD's first ever drone strategy, I appreciate that this is an area where we need to move fast and to have the capability to deliver in the modern battle space. Will the Secretary of State be gifting any of these capabilities to Ukraine, such as the older Chinooks or the Pumas, especially given what happened yesterday? Finally and most importantly, what on earth does all this mean for the strategic defence review, from the MRSS to future drones for the British armed forces? The Secretary of State will no doubt say that I should wait for the SDR, so why did he not wait for the SDR before making today's decisions?

To conclude, whatever the Chancellor's true grasp of economics, she has certainly been able to force her priorities on to the country, getting the MOD to scrap major capabilities before it has undertaken the Department's much-vaunted strategic defence review. The Labour Government have killed off North sea oil, undermining our energy security. This week, they are killing off the family farm and threatening our food security, and today, they are scrapping key defence capabilities and weakening our national security. The Government have made their choices, and they own the consequences.

**John Healey:** That was a rather wide-ranging response that spanned the fiscal position in 2010 and farming today. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the last time this country spent 2.5% on defence was in 2010 under Labour, and that the Tory plan to spend 2.5% on defence was a pre-election gimmick, announced four weeks before the election was called and never hardwired into any Government finances. That is why it was unfunded; that is why it was a pre-election gimmick; and that is why the Institute for Fiscal Studies called the plan “misleading”.

I readily pay tribute to Ben Wallace as one of my predecessors. The hon. Gentleman talked not about defence reform, but about the decision that Ben Wallace rightly made to step up with military aid to Ukraine, so that we led the field and made sure that other countries followed suit. We were proud to support those decisions in opposition, and we are proud to continue that UK leadership, and to help command the continued, united support for Ukraine.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's welcome for the retention incentives, which are for aircraft engineers, as well as the retention payments for the Army ranks. Those payments are for privates and lance-corporals; they stand as I have announced them, and will start from January. I am glad of his welcome for the decision I took on Watchkeeper. He did indeed launch a drone strategy as defence procurement Minister. He recognises that we are talking about a 14-year-old drone in the hands of the British Army, and that the innovation cycle for drones in Ukraine is two to three months. We can do better; the Army knows how it will do better, and it will replace Watchkeeper.

The hon. Gentleman also asked questions about helicopters, the future structure of our forces, and the capabilities we need. Those areas are being considered by the strategic defence review. As I said in my statement, I made today's decisions in consultation with the reviewers, to make sure that they are aligned in their thinking, and in dialogue with NATO.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark. Those ships were mothballed; there were no plans for either of them to go back to sea for nearly 10 years—until they were due to be taken out of service. They were not ready to sail or to fight. There are capabilities there that can be covered elsewhere. That will save us money every year—money that we can redeploy in defence, and put towards upgrading our forces and technologies.

The hon. Gentleman saw the figures before the election that I saw afterwards. He knows the truth of the black hole that his Government left across the board, but he did nothing in defence to get a grip on the budgets, or to decommission out-of-date kit. I am taking action now to strengthen defence for the future. These decisions are overdue, and the service chiefs support these changes, which means that we can move more rapidly—as we must, learning the lessons from Ukraine and recognising the changing nature of warfare and the rising global threats. We have to evolve our equipment, and invest in and prepare our forces for the future.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab):** Overall, I welcome the Secretary of State's statement today, because some of the work to reform the operations of the Ministry of Defence is long overdue. It is right that old platforms be retired and that we transition to newer equipment. I am also glad to note that the plan has the full backing of our military chiefs.

However, this plan is being implemented without the full findings of the strategic defence review having been announced, and obviously it has cost implications as well as an impact on our people, so can the Secretary of State advise me on a couple of things? First, will the unrequired kit be either sold to allies or given to Ukraine? Secondly, how will our people be reskilled and retrained, so that there are no job losses?

**John Healey:** As I said in my statement, the decisions I have taken help us to get a grip of the MOD budget now and create greater scope to better implement the strategic defence review when it reports. These decisions, as I said, are overdue. They were ducked by Ministers in the previous Government. Further decisions about what to do with the decommissioned equipment have not yet been made, but when I make those decisions, I will ensure that I inform my hon. Friend's Committee. I look forward to the grilling that he and his colleagues on the Committee are set to give me tomorrow morning, no doubt about this and a number of other things.

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

**Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD):** I declare an interest in that my nephew is an aircraft engineer with the Royal Air Force, so I shall not be commenting on the retention payment, much as it sounds very handsome.

I welcome the emphasis in the statement on defence people. A legacy of the last Conservative Government was that there was not enough emphasis on retaining brilliant people in the armed forces. With Grant Shapps, we saw a Defence Secretary who was fascinated by technology—he came to the House and made a statement about DragonFire—but missed the very important things that were slipping down the list, such as the platforms that we hear today are being decommissioned. So I welcome the pay rise for personnel, and I particularly welcome the retention payment for Army personnel who have served for more than four years, given that the legacy of Capita is an appalling one.

However, there are some alarming gaps. The new Chinook heavy-lift helicopters not coming in till 2027 leaves a very substantial gap of three years in relation to the 14 Chinooks. The new medium helicopter contract is not due to be awarded till next year. I question when the contract for the new medium helicopter will be introduced—perhaps not until the beginning of the next decade. The multi-role support ships are not due to come into service until 2033. I am alarmed at what that may do for the ability of the Royal Marines to operate in the littoral. I question that the statement said there was full backing from our service chiefs. Of course, there was: they have to salute, turn to the right and carry on. What was lacking was a statement about this being done in consultation with the strategic defence reviewers. Was this statement given their full backing?



**John Healey:** My statement was very clear. I made these decisions in consultation with the strategic defence reviewers. It is not for them to back them or not. But if the hon. Gentleman asked them, I am sure they would say that these are entirely the right decisions, that they go in the right direction and that they start to make our forces more fit for the future. These decisions are consistent with the direction of our thinking, which is why I can confidently take them now, because we need to create the scope to move faster towards the future once the defence review reports.

We also need to do more to deal with the dire state of the finances that we inherited in defence and across the Government. The hon. Gentleman asks about the Chinooks. This acceleration of their retirement will apply to the 14 oldest helicopters in a fleet of more than 50, some of which are more than 35 years old. This means that the oldest 14 will be retired at the point when they are due to enter a costly maintenance package. That will not happen, and it means we can speed up the transition to the new, much more capable Chinooks that will arrive. It also means that we can save money for defence that we can redeploy to other purposes.

Finally, I very much hope that we can sign up the hon. Gentleman's nephew with the new aircraft engineers incentive payment.

**Derek Twigg** (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): Those needing to know in what state the last Government left the armed forces should look at the report on readiness for war by the Defence Committee, on which there was a Conservative majority. I really welcome the Secretary of State's statement, particularly on waste and on the recruitment and retention of key people in the armed forces. However, on the issue of defence reform, can I ask him whether in the few months he has been in the job he feels that the MOD is fit for purpose? Is it agile and adaptable enough for the modern, oncoming threats we face?

**John Healey:** The short answer to my hon. Friend's question is no, which is precisely the reason for the far-reaching reforms that I have begun. This process will continue, I expect, through my entire time in this post. It needs to be relentless, far-reaching and radical; otherwise, we simply will not be able as a country to fashion the forces we need in the future to be able to fight, deter and defend this country.

I say to my hon. Friend, who is one of the leading experts on defence, having served as a Defence Committee member during the previous Government, that I value his view, and I refer Opposition Front Benchers to the points he made. I congratulate him on being, and wish him well as, the leader of the new UK parliamentary delegation to NATO. I wish all the Members involved, from both Houses and from all sides, a successful delegation visit to Montreal later this week.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I have known the right hon. Gentleman for a long time, and he will know that I have a high regard for him, so I simply offer him these words from my knowledge of all the battles one undertakes within government—always with the Treasury.

Putting aside for one second any party difference on this, we all want a functional and ready defensive force able to take on whatever comes at us. We live in a very

unstable and dangerous world—more dangerous than at any time I can recall. The Government rightly, and I welcome this, set up the strategic defence review to set out the key priorities and key threats, and it therefore seems reasonable to me that we should wait for this report, which I believe will strengthen the MOD's arm in future discussions, negotiations and battles with the Treasury—always with the Treasury.

I pose this simple question to the right hon. Gentleman. When he feeds little bits and pieces to the Treasury ahead of the review, it will come back for more. Bulwark and Albion still had life in them and could have been resurrected; mothballing is what the Americans use all the time. Could I please suggest that he rethinks this process, and says to the Treasury, "Back off now, and when the review is there, we can have a proper discussion and a proper debate"?

**John Healey:** I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's tone and his advice. On the savings I have outlined that will flow from the six decommissioning decisions, that money will be retained in full in defence. It will not go to the Treasury. He links finances to the strategic defence review. The Prime Minister has always been clear since the NATO summit in Washington in July that it is the strategic defence review first and the pathway to 2.5% second, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury recently confirmed that we should expect that in the spring.

**Chris Evans** (Caerphilly) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend, and it is good to hear a Secretary of State finally getting to grips with the root and branch reform that we need in the MOD. I want him to cast his mind back to the dossier on waste that we produced in opposition. It showed that, since 2010, £13 billion of taxpayers' money had been wasted by the MOD. Will he commit, as he did in that report, to a root and branch National Audit Office report on MOD waste, and to the MOD being the first Department to be referred to the Office for Value for Money? Will he also commit to continuing to update this House on his ongoing battle against MOD waste?

**John Healey:** I appreciate my hon. Friend's comments, and the reminder to this House of the dossier of defence waste that we did indeed work on together in opposition. I can confirm to him and the House that I have commissioned an internal audit of waste, but I have not waited for the results of that; I have already reduced the consultancy spend by £300 million this year. It was set to be a ballooned £1 billion over three years for consultancy and extra staff. I have also scrapped the Tories' £40 million VIP helicopter contract, which was money spent on moving VIPs around the country, rather than investing in our servicemen and women, which we can now do.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): This is a black day for the Royal Marines. I advise the Defence Secretary that he would do well to have a look at the report, "Sunset for the Royal Marines?", which was published by the Defence Committee in February 2018, when the issue of scrapping our amphibious assault ships was described by the cross-party Committee as "militarily illiterate" and totally at variance with strategic reality. Does he accept that the purpose of HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, which were due to remain in service for nine and 10 more years respectively, is to

have the capability of making a landing across a foreshore when it is opposed by enemy forces, just as the Fearless and Intrepid did the job before Albion and Bulwark? Does he agree that we have no way of knowing whether the absence of that capability for the next decade will be an incentive for somebody to try something like the Falklands?

**John Healey:** I have a huge amount of respect for the right hon. Gentleman. He led the Committee that produced an important report, but it was six years ago. Far from it being “a black day”, as he says, this statement signals a bright future, which will be reinforced by the SDR for the Marines and their elite force. On HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, he is right that both ships were not due to go out of service for nine and 10 years respectively, but neither—given the state they are in and decisions taken by the last Government—were set to sail again. In other words, they had in practice been taken out of service, but Ministers had not been willing to admit that. Our three Bay-class landing ships and RFA Argus for now will continue to provide, as they do currently, the amphibious capability. That will allow us to save at least £9 million a year that would have been spent under the previous plans, and it will allow us to focus much more strongly on the multi-role support ships, which promise to have a greater capability and a broader range of ability for the future.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s focus on the future of our forces, which has been backed by the chiefs, and I particularly welcome the retention payments for our aircraft engineers and Army personnel. As others have alluded to, technology is changing the nature of the threats that we face. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this Government will work closely with the defence industry to harness new technologies to ensure that our forces have the kit they need to respond effectively to increasing threats?

**John Healey:** I can confirm that, and I welcome my hon. Friend’s comments. The best exemplification of the argument she makes is in the Army’s plans to rapidly replace the Watchkeeper mark 1 capability. It is a 14-year-old drone in an era where, as Ukraine tells us, drone technology has a lifecycle of two to three months. The Army knows what it can do better. It knows it can do it more quickly. It knows how it will focus its efforts for the future. Decommissioning the Watchkeeper mark 1s will allow it better to do that.

**Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, and I recognise and appreciate that he is doing a difficult job in a dangerous world. Can I seek some clarification on the scrapping of HMS Bulwark and HMS Albion? We are told that there is a bright future for the Royal Marines, yet at the same time we hear from the Government that decisions about defence capabilities will be made in the strategic defence review. Can the Secretary of State tell the House precisely what conversations he has had about the future of the Royal Marines? Specifically, what does that mean for the UK’s commitment towards NATO to defend the high north?

**John Healey:** The statement means no change to the available amphibious capability, because, in practice, Albion and Bulwark had been mothballed. They are out of action, and there were no plans for them to sail again until they were to be taken out of service a decade into the future. This position allows us to focus more quickly on the more modern, more flexible capabilities we will need for the future. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on becoming a member of the Defence Committee. I am sure that if he is at the Committee sitting tomorrow morning, he will pursue this matter further.

**Fred Thomas** (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): A bit of this debate should be about honesty. If the Ministry of Defence were to step forward and say, “We want to modernise and be able to buy kit at scale and at pace, but we have a limited budget,” it would just be being honest and realistic to say that we have to let some things go.

With my Royal Marines background, I first went on Bulwark in 2017 on a training exercise, learning how to plan and execute raiding operations. I have fond memories of the ship, as do many in the Royal Marines, but that exercise was not conducted at sea; it was conducted with Bulwark alongside in Devonport, where it has remained for a number of years. Even then, we were told, “You will go not on this ship at sea. It will not happen.” People knew that at the time, so can we be honest?

On Plymouth and Devonport, where Albion and Bulwark are, and HMS Westminster, which the Secretary of State has also mentioned, may I ask him how the jobs and workers in Plymouth will be protected? With new submarines coming forward at huge scale, can we talk about the investment in Plymouth required—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. I call the Secretary of State.

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend is right that too often decisions were ducked or Parliament was too often not fully informed when they were taken. The point he makes about the experience on Bulwark is telling. We do not have the capability, if it is incapable of sailing. We do not have the facility to train effectively on it, if all it can do is stay alongside. In practice, as I said earlier, Bulwark and Albion had been taken out of action; Ministers had just been unwilling to level with the public and with Parliament about that. I understand his interest in the case of Plymouth and Devonport. I have been a strong supporter in opposition and in government of the Team Barrow transformation approach. There is a case for looking at replicating a similar model in other parts of the country. For me, the first in frame would be Plymouth.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): What does this announcement tell us about how the strategic defence review is going? One lesson of the Ukraine war is that old kit can be very useful. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) said, America’s airfields and dockyards are stacked full of old kit for future contingencies. We are throwing away capabilities that are only out of commission because there was not enough money. Now the Secretary of State is telling us that there is probably even less money. Please will he not

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come to this House and pretend he is just clearing out an old cupboard of rubbish that everybody had forgotten about and that the defence chiefs are hopping up and down with delight at his clearing out.

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman has a long interest and great expertise in defence. Over the years, I have listened to him make the argument that the UK's alacrity in disposing of any decommissioned kit and commitment was a strategy that should be reviewed and rethought and was different from that of some other countries. I have made it clear to the House today that the decommissioning decisions have been taken, but what we do with the kit as it comes out of service has not yet been settled.

On the strategic defence review, what my decisions and announcements tell the House and the hon. Gentleman are, first, that people will be at the heart of the plans for the future, and secondly, that the technology is changing at an accelerating pace. That imperative will be part of the strategic defence review. The lesson of Ukraine also tells us that we must have an increasingly integrated force—that is reflected in the decisions I have taken today. He should expect that to be reflected also in the confirmation and recommendations of the strategic defence review.

**Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): Another day, another Labour Minister at the Dispatch Box cleaning up the mess left by the Conservative party. Does the Secretary of State agree that the decisions outlined in today's statement will fix the foundations of our nation's defence, spend every penny he has wisely and keep our nation safer?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend is right. I would add that when, inevitably, we want to do more than we can afford, we must focus our resources on the areas of most importance. That is the underlying principle that applies to the retention payments for the tri-service aircraft engineers, lance corporals and other ranks in the Army after four years' service, which I have been able to announce this afternoon. We need them for the future. We have trained them, they have great skills and we want them to have a longer and more productive career in our armed forces.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Servicemen and women will have listened with despair to the Government and the Opposition argue about whether the strategic and catastrophic underfunding of the armed forces was over the last 14 or the last 30 years. Either way, it results in the situation of defence of the realm that we find ourselves in.

Given the Secretary of State's announcement today, and with one more Type 23 to bite the dust, can he advise how many escorts and frigates will be available—subject to the power improvement project on Type 45—before Type 31 and Type 26 are available? What about the AW149 new medium-lift helicopter? Why is this Government moving at a snail's pace, as the last Government did, on new medium-lift helicopters? What message does the 31 rotary-linked platforms and five Royal Navy and Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships coming out of service send to the outside world? What will the

strategic defence review do to bolster that situation? Some £300 million less is being spent on consultants, but can the Secretary of State advise what the consultancy spend will be now in the MOD?

**John Healey:** It will be £300 million less than it would have been before. The decision on HMS Northumberland makes no difference to the availability of the Royal Navy ships at sea, because that ship was not capable. Refitting it in its current state, as planned, could have cost hundreds of millions of pounds—that is also behind my decision. The process for the medium-lift helicopters is under way and continues.

**Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): On a recent visit to Commando Training Centre Royal Marines with the armed forces parliamentary scheme we saw the amazing Gordon Messenger facility, which serves Royal Marines, their families and veterans. It is a true community hub, and was valued by everyone in the service. Will the Secretary of State say more about the support that this Government are giving to service personnel, veterans and their families?

**John Healey:** One of the most important things that this House—never mind the Government who introduced the Bill—has done in the past week is to give its full backing to the Second Reading of the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill. This is an independent champion who will improve service life and will be there for those who serve and the families who support them. I look forward to my hon. Friend's contribution to those debates, and I congratulate him on becoming a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which is a great scheme. I know that he will have inspiring experiences and will make an even more informed contribution to debates in this House.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I appreciate the constraints on the Defence Secretary, but this statement makes a mockery of the SDR process. It also removes significant lines of contingent capability. He says that these will not be the last difficult decisions that he will have to make and that he is working in lockstep with the SDR, so is he, and is it, rolling the pitch for the removal or mothballing of the carriers, as has been rumoured? Does he understand what that means for the future of the Royal Navy as a globally deployable blue-water navy? Given his comments on Albion and Bulwark, is he also rolling the pitch for the future of the Royal Marines, since the two are intertwined and will be for the next 10 years before a replacement can be provided?

**John Healey:** Bulwark and Albion are not capabilities available to the Marines at present. On the Marines, I have said three times this afternoon that the future of its elite force, as part of the complex of what we need for the future, will be reinforced in the SDR. That is what I expect. The decisions that I have announced today are consistent with the SDR. He wrongly suggested that somehow these announcements make a mockery of it, but they are entirely consistent and are taken in consultation with the reviewers. On the future of carriers, in recent weeks my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces and I have paid particular attention to the plans for one of those carriers to undertake the carrier strike 2025 voyage into the Indo-Pacific, where it



will have validation exercises with some important allies. It is a vital part of our ability to reinforce both our hard power and our soft power in future.

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. It is clear both from the statement and from the follow-up questions that the previous Government have wasted millions of pounds in defence spending that could have been spent better, making it clear that Labour is the party of defence. That money could also have been spent better in our economy, to support the defence sector across the UK. What steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that future programmes will be spent in the UK? What guarantees can he offer to support shipbuilding across this country?

**John Healey:** I am proud of our tradition of UK shipbuilding, including in Scotland. I want Britain's warships to be built in Britain. My hon. Friend may be aware that we are committed to make the Government's industrial strategy with the defence sector one of those priority sectors, so that we not only strengthen our forces for the future but use defence to strengthen our economy, create fresh jobs and back the innovative companies that will have a bigger part to play in both our security and our prosperity.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): The Secretary of State presented the savings as no-brainers—the ships were damaged and obsolete—but in his closing remarks he told us that these would not be the last difficult decisions. He simply cannot have it both ways. It is all about the messaging in the end. What message will be received from this statement in Buenos Aires, Moscow, Peking and Tehran?

**John Healey:** The message is clear: we now have a Government who are willing to take the decisions to deal with outdated equipment that should have been retired long ago, so that we can switch our focus and our finances, and develop the capabilities, technologies and weaponry that our forces need to fight more effectively in future.

**Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): I very much welcome today's statement from the Secretary of State. It is rather galling to hear from Opposition Members about cuts, when the previous Government's biggest cut was to our armed forces—to the smallest size since the end of the Napoleonic wars. In that vein, I very much welcome the increase in the salaries of our armed forces, the highest in 20 years, and in particular the retention payments to aircraft engineers and serving armed personnel. What message can my right hon. Friend give to those who are in our armed forces, and those who are thinking about a career in our armed forces, that they will have a better future if they serve?

**John Healey:** The message is that our UK armed forces offer a fantastic career: a wide range of opportunity and skills for any young person who wants to sign up that will give them experiences and set them up for life. My hon. Friend is totally right when he talks about Conservative cuts. In the first year of a Labour Government, we are increasing defence spending by nearly £3 billion. In the first year of the Conservative Government in 2010, they cut defence by £2 billion.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): If I can echo the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith)—now that the Secretary of State's Treasury minder has left the Chamber, he will be able to speak more openly about some of the challenges he faces in dealing with the Treasury—I appreciate that the Secretary of State faces really difficult decisions and that all these decisions will have been incredibly hard to make, but will he confirm to the House that the Chinooks and the Pumas will, as a first option, be at least offered to the Ukrainians to see if they can use them in any way at all?

**John Healey:** Given the right hon. Gentleman's experience in this very job, I will take that as an early representation on the future decisions I will have to take on what to do with the kit once it is decommissioned.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Secretary of State rightly says that the MOD needs reform. One of the major failures has been the procurement of equipment, which has led to the wasting of hundreds of millions, if not billions, of pounds of taxpayers' cash. Will he commit to also reform the recruitment of new personnel into the armed forces? Nobody has a good word to say about the outsourcing contract to Capita. Bring it in-house. Will he commit to that?

**John Healey:** The hon. Gentleman is right. Procurement is one of the first focuses and most important areas for further reform in defence, but defence reform is required across the board. On recruitment, I hope he will welcome the steps I have already taken to remove almost 100 bits of red tape that prevent young people from being recruited. I hope he will welcome the tough targets for the rapid turnaround in recruitment and an offer of a training place. I hope he will welcome also the direct recruitment route for those who want to join our cyberforces, as part of reinforcing our national security.

**Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): With close social and economic ties between communities on both sides of the Tamar, a Devonport deal is very important to people in South East Cornwall and in Plymouth. Will the Secretary of State commit to scoping a Devonport deal that looks to the future?

**John Healey:** If my hon. Friend, with her south-west posse, wants to come to see me to discuss this matter, I would be very happy to try to arrange that soon.

**Tim Roca** (Macclesfield) (Lab): The Minister of State for Defence in the other place earlier today talked about the world becoming darker and darker. Can the Secretary of State assure us, after the difficult decisions he has had to take today, that the SDR will be robust and that the defence equipment plan will reflect future threats and the future capabilities that our armed forces will require?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend puts his finger exactly on the button. At the heart of the SDR is an assessment of the increasing and diversifying threats we face, the rapidly changing technology and nature of warfare, and therefore the capabilities we require for the future and the sort of forces we require for the future. Those are at

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the heart of the work the reviewers are doing at the moment. They are doing that in a thorough way and at pace. I expect them to conclude early in the new year.

**Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): While it is deeply disappointing to hear the decisions around Devonport's surface fleet today, in particular as the MP for a proud home to the Royal Marines and 42 Commando, it does provide, as has been alluded to by some colleagues on the Labour Benches, an opportunity to raise again the need for a Devonport deal, and in particular Plymouth and Devonport's role in refitting the Royal Navy's submarines going forward. As a member of that south-west posse, it is great that the Secretary of State has already offered a meeting. However, what we are specifically looking for is cross-ministerial commitment. We are getting plenty of meetings, but we want to know that the Ministers are joined up and having conversations cross-departmentally, and that the Devonport deal might be able to offer Plymouth and the wider south-west a future as we see these armed forces changes.

**John Healey:** I regard defence as largely beyond party politics, so I am happy to extend, on a cross-party basis, that invitation to a meeting to the hon. Lady. What I cannot undertake to do is to promise to deliver a cross-ministerial meeting, but if she is happy to start with me, then that is what we can do.

**Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): As one of a number of Royal Marines on the Labour Benches, I really welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to the Royal Marines in the forthcoming SDR. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Moor View (Fred Thomas), I served on HMS Albion, but that was 15 years ago. I think we all recognise that the battlefield has

changed and that it is important we have the financing available to invest in the technology of the future. On reform, I notice that only two out of 49 major defence programmes are on time and on budget at the moment. What steps is the Secretary of State taking on defence reform to ensure the failures we saw under the previous Government can never be repeated?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend refers to the regular reporting of the Major Projects Authority. The fact that only two out of 49 major defence projects can be said to be on time and on budget means that the Department is not delivering effectively for the taxpayer or for our forces. That is why defence reform, far reaching and deep, is required.

**Mr Mark Sewards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement today. It is really good to have a Secretary of State who is taking the long-term decisions to ensure our military is fit for the future. I particularly welcome the fact that all personnel affected by today's decisions will be retrained or redeployed. In his first month in the job, the Prime Minister stated at the NATO summit that we were firmly committed to increasing defence spending to that 2.5% target. Given that this today's final question, will he take this opportunity to restate not only that commitment, but also our commitment to take the long-term decisions so that our armed forces are equipped to ensure that our country is secure at home and strong abroad?

**John Healey:** My hon. Friend does not just ask about the detail of the statement, but cuts right to the chase of the purpose of the announcements I have made today. I will reinforce his point. The purpose is that we can make Britain better defended: we can make Britain more secure at home and strong abroad. That is exactly what this Government are determined to do.

## Points of Order

3.8 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. There are now widespread reports in the media of Storm Shadow missiles being used in Russian territory for the first time. To be clear, I entirely sympathise with the Secretary of State in his reluctance to provide an operational running commentary, but equally he will appreciate that once these matters are being reported in the media there may be an expectation among colleagues that we will hear more in the House. Madam Deputy Speaker, have you been given any representations about a possible statement on these matters by the Ministry of Defence?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani)**: I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice of his point of order. As he will, I believe, be aware, I have been given no indication that the Secretary of State will be making such a statement, but the Secretary of State is obviously here and taking note of what is being said, and if he wishes to comment either now or later, he has the opportunity to do so.

**The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey)**: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have seen, over recent weeks, a significant change in the action and in the rhetoric on Ukraine, and Ukraine's action on the battlefield speaks for itself. We, as a nation and as a Government, are doubling down on our support for Ukraine, and are determined to do more. When I discussed this with Minister Umerov in a call yesterday, he talked about Ukraine's robust response to recent Russian escalations—the escalation in the attacks on Ukrainian cities and children, the escalation in the attacks on the energy system, and the escalation that

involves deploying 10,000 North Korean troops in combat positions on the frontline. We also discussed our plans, as the UK, to support the Ukrainians throughout 2025.

I remain committed to keeping Parliament as fully informed as possible. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and the House will, I think, understand the reasons why, at this point, I am not able to go into any further operational details.

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: I trust that that response has satisfied the hon. Member for South Suffolk.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During Prime Minister's questions, the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), said that the Government had given a pay rise to trade unions. That is factually incorrect. The Government gave pay rises to workers, and gave them to all workers, regardless of whether or not they were members of trade unions. That is the power of a trade union.

I know that it is difficult to educate His Majesty's official Opposition about the benefits of trade unions, Madam Deputy Speaker, but can you advise me on whether I can compel the shadow Minister to come back and correct the record?

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: I understand that the hon. Member informed the shadow Minister that she was due to make a point of order on this issue, and I thank her for notifying us of the point of order. She will know that the contents of Members' speeches are not a matter for the Chair—if they were, I would keep them much shorter—but I am sure that if the shadow Minister inadvertently said anything that was inaccurate, he will find a way in which to correct the record.



## Terminal Illness (Relief of Pain)

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

3.12 pm

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to issue guidance about the application of the criminal law in respect of the administration of pain relief by healthcare professionals to people who are terminally ill; and for connected purposes.

As we know, a ten-minute rule Bill is a delicate flower; it is almost certainly doomed to oblivion because there is no time for a Second Reading debate, but it can serve a purpose in allowing us to demonstrate a truth or a problem, or even just ask a question. I am deliberately proposing this Bill 10 days before the debate on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill—the “assisted suicide” Bill—because I want to highlight a real problem. There is simply not enough time to consider the immense complexities of this issue before we will be required to make our decision. That point will be the subject of a joint letter from me and the Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), to be published in *The Guardian* tomorrow.

A private Member’s Bill may be an appropriate vehicle for an issue that is narrow in scope, or involves a decision that is relatively clearcut, but that is not the case for the assisted suicide Bill. Were it a Government Bill—which it should be—there would be an impact assessment, but there is none. The Bill is much longer than almost any other private Member’s Bill, but it was published only very recently. What will be the impact on the NHS? Do we not need to know? At least one retired judge has questioned the role of judges. Should we not know more?

My Bill seeks to gain, and give the public, extra knowledge on one key aspect of this debate. What is the state of palliative care in this country? What are the options available to assist people in their dying? I use that phrase advisedly. All hospices currently assist people in dying as peacefully and painlessly as possible, but they do not do that by administering lethal drugs. So much of the impetus in favour of assisted suicide comes from an understandable fear of dying in pain. Talking to palliative care nurses and doctors, I am told that in nearly every case experienced practitioners can make our passing bearable, but I would like to know more, and I think that the public would. We would like to know more about the passing of people with degenerative diseases.

Demand for palliative care is increasing, and will continue to do so. It is estimated that by 2050, one in every four people in England and Wales will be over 65. The charity Marie Curie estimates that by 2048, over 646,000 more people will need palliative care—and, of course, just as individuals and families are feeling the cost of living crisis, our hospices are facing higher expenses. Hospice UK estimates that hospices faced £100 million more in costs in 2023 than in the year before. Research from King’s College London suggests that more than 100,000 people in the UK die each year without receiving the palliative care that they need and deserve.

My Bill asks the Secretaries of State for Justice, and for Health and Social Care, to publish a detailed analysis and advice on the law and procedures. For instance, palliative care nurses tell me that if your only motive is to relieve pain, you can give as much morphine as you like to a patient, and you will not kill him or her. However, I also hear that sometimes the pain doubles but the nurse—probably not in a hospice, but in a hospital—is unwilling to double the dose for fear of legal consequences. I hope that if I am dying of terminal cancer, a nurse will not hesitate to give me as much as necessary. I was at the deathbed of a dear friend and former colleague in the House; we were together in a hospice. I could hear the morphine pass, gurgling, into his wrists. He was knocked out, and his death was peaceful. It was clearly good practice. We, the public, need to be told what the situation is, in respect of ensuring a peaceful death in all conditions. My Bill would be a small step forward in taking up the debate and informing it. The debate in 10 days’ time could be seen as a useful airing of the issues, and then, in a year or two, we could make a measured and well-informed decision.

This is an immeasurably complex issue. First, there are deeply held moral and religious concerns about the ethics of assisted suicide; but even if those are of no concern to some people, there are practical issues as well. The hospice movement is one of our most loving and admired services, but we all know that sometimes there is not sufficient experience in some NHS hospitals to match the care given in hospices, so we need to know more. Should we not start by building up our hospice movement before we are given a binary choice in 10 days’ time? All this is before we even start to consider other issues, such as extending the law to other countries, or pressure being put on old people who feel themselves to be a burden.

There is something else that we must consider. We know that we must provide more funding for the hospice and care home sector, but how can we afford it from general taxation? We need a national debate on a new social contract for a ballooning frail and elderly population with multiple health needs, and I have long argued that we can only do so with social insurance. We have to pay more for our care in old age. What we do not want, however, is pressure for assisted suicide for old people because there are not the resources to pay for them. Again, we need much more information about this whole area. I hope that my intervention today, in which I am seeking more knowledge, not just loudly stating my own position, is helpful, and that my Bill is useful.

Today I received the following letter from a doctor:

“Only recently, I was giving my condolences to a grieving woman who had lost her husband in the early hours. He had been given a few small doses of pain relief and mild sedatives over the last few nights for symptom control and had passed away peacefully at her side. She asked me in all seriousness, ‘Doctor, did the nurses give him something to make him die quicker last night?’ This was an awful lingering doubt that she had. I was able to firmly reassure her that, no, the medication would not have sped up his passing.

For her, and the vast majority of other patients, doctors are there to prolong life and palliate symptoms. Were this to change, then we should not be doctors in the eyes of many but bringers of death, agents of a state which counts the weakest members as expendable and worthy of nothing but an early grave.”

In conclusion, I hope that my Bill and this very short debate will inform discussion on this unbelievably moving and delicate matter. I have a dream, as we all have, that in years to come, when our time comes, we will be given the care that we need, but there is so much doubt and uncertainty about that. Many people, quite understandably, take a position from a point of principle. They may believe fundamentally, from a religious point of view, in the right to life; or they may have a libertarian point of view that states that everybody has a right to control their destiny. But when making this decision, probably one of the most important in this Parliament, it is surely important that we do so from a state of knowledge, and that we have a hospice movement and an NHS that are fully funded to care for our old people, so that we can assure all people that in this country—this civilised nation—we will ensure that everyone's passing is as painless and peaceful as possible. In that spirit, I commend the Bill to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Sir Edward Leigh, Rachael Maskell, Sir John Hayes, Danny Kruger, Sir Christopher Chope, Sir Julian Lewis, Lincoln Jopp, Martin Vickers, Dame Meg Hillier, Saqib Bhatti, Helen Grant and Sir Roger Gale present the Bill.

Sir Edward Leigh accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 December, and to be printed ( Bill 136 ).*

## Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill

### *Second Reading*

3.23 pm

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones):** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am proud of the unity that this House has shown in its support for Ukraine. This support has been steadfast since the onset of Russia's illegal full-scale invasion in February 2022, regardless of the party in office, and it remains so today. We in this House recognise that while Ukraine is on the frontline, it is fighting for democracy and security across Europe. I want to make it clear that this Government stand, and will continue to stand, in unwavering support of Ukraine with our G7 allies.

On 22 October, my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Defence Secretary announced that the UK would contribute £2.26 billion to the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration loans to Ukraine scheme, the ERA. This landmark agreement will provide Ukraine with a total of \$50 billion in vital additional funding, allowing it to continue to fight back against Putin's war machine. Crucially, these funds will be repaid not by Ukraine, but from the extraordinary profits made on sanctioned Russian sovereign assets held in the European Union.

This Bill simply provides the spending authority for the UK to contribute to the ERA scheme, enabling us to begin disbursing funds to Ukraine. It is another important demonstration of the UK's commitment to backing Ukraine for as long as it takes. It will unlock our £2.26 billion contribution to the ERA, funding which is additional to all previous commitments.

The UK has long been at the forefront of support for Ukraine. Our total military, humanitarian and economic support pledged since February 2022 already stands at £12.8 billion. We have often been the first mover on military support in particular, which ranges from training over 47,000 Ukrainian military personnel to providing a squadron of Challenger 2 main battle tanks. Earlier this year, the Government announced that the UK would continue to provide guaranteed military support of £3 billion per year to Ukraine for as long as it takes.

But while we can be proud of what the UK has already done for Ukraine, Members of the House need no reminding that Ukraine's military, budgetary and humanitarian needs continue to be grave. Existing support is not enough; we must go further still to ensure that Ukraine wins this war. We must do this alongside our allies. The ERA is an ambitious scheme, and represents a united G7 pledge, with contributions from the United States, the European Union, Canada and Japan. Our £2.26 billion constitutes a fair and proportionate contribution to the scheme based on the UK's GDP share in the G7 and EU.

Each lender will now negotiate a bilateral loan with Ukraine to govern how the funds are distributed and spent within a collective framework agreed by the G7. Repayments from the profits on immobilised Russian assets will be redistributed to the G7 lenders from the EU in proportion to our contributions. The EU regulation providing for this is already in place.

The Government have assessed that Ukraine's most pressing need is for military support. The UK's contribution to the ERA is therefore earmarked for military procurement

[Darren Jones]

to bolster Ukraine's capacity for self-defence. This support will help ensure that Ukraine can continue to withstand Russian aggression and fight back against it. The UK is committed to ensuring value for money for both the UK and Ukraine, including through exploring the use of existing UK-enabled procurement channels for Ukraine to purchase the equipment that it needs. Our funding will be delivered in three tranches over three financial years, with the first tranche intended to be delivered in early 2025.

The Bill has one simple purpose: to unlock the UK's contribution to the ERA. It consists of one substantive clause, which seeks the authority of Parliament to spend the money on the UK's contribution and make good on our commitment. The Bill is not intended to be used for any purpose beyond that, and it will not be used to spend above the £2.26 billion figure that has been announced. Our figure has been agreed with the G7 and caps have been built into the scheme at a G7 level through the EU repayment mechanism.

Although slim, this Bill is essential. Royal Assent is required before we can begin disbursing funds to Ukraine, and before we can receive any repayments from the profits being held in the European Union. It is therefore vital that we pass this Bill as quickly as possible, so we can begin disbursement this winter, as Ukraine's needs are immediate. I hope that I can count on the support of the House to achieve this, and help us get this vital money into Ukraine's hands as quickly as possible.

The \$50 billion collectively delivered through the ERA lays down a marker to show that we will continue to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. Collectively, we will pursue every available means of making Russia pay for the damage it has done in Ukraine. I am proud to present the UK's contribution to the scheme today, which will make an immediate tangible difference to Ukraine's capacity to defend itself. This Bill facilitates that contribution, and I commend it to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

3.29 pm

**Richard Fuller** (North Bedfordshire) (Con): Before I turn to the Bill, I just say that the Chief Secretary, in an earlier debate, kindly welcomed me to my new role, and I would like to reciprocate that welcome today. He and I have worked together as members of the Business and Trade Committee, which he chaired and of which I believe you were also a member, Madam Deputy Speaker. We had a shared desire to use Parliament to hold to account fearlessly, factually and, when needed, ferociously those who hold authority and power over our constituents. He now finds himself in such a position of authority and power, and I will hold him to account fearlessly, factually and, when needed, ferociously. However, today is not a day for ferocity.

We welcome this Bill. It is an important signal of the continuing commitment of the United Kingdom to the people of Ukraine, the defence of Europe and the achievement of peace through strength. We join the tributes to the people of Ukraine—the men and women who have had to leave behind their peaceful endeavours in order to stand shoulder to shoulder to defend their land and liberties. Today we are talking about financial

contributions, but we should never forget that the greatest sacrifice is being made each and every day by members of the Ukraine military and civilians, upon whom Putin's rockets rain down destruction each and every day.

Under the strong leadership of former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the United Kingdom led the world in defending Ukraine, and since 2022 we have pledged more than £12 billion in overall support. We were often the first mover on vital lethal aid, from Storm Shadow missiles to Challenger and main battle tanks. We imposed the largest and most severe set of sanctions that Russia had ever seen, to cripple Putin's war machine. We sanctioned around 2,000 individuals, companies and groups, and this economic pressure restricts Russia's ability to prosecute its illegal invasion. More broadly, we built up a formidable sanctions regime during our time in office and brought in a major new sanctions strategy to deter and disrupt malign behaviour, and it is pleasing that the current Government are continuing those efforts.

On behalf of the United Kingdom, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) hosted the Ukraine recovery conference last year, raising over \$60 billion for Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction. This Bill takes a further step forward in our commitments to Ukraine, and does so alongside our allies. It fulfils the United Kingdom's part of June's G7 mandate—confirmed by G7 finance Ministers in Washington last month—to disburse for the benefit of Ukraine approximately \$50 billion from the extraordinary revenue acceleration loan, or ERA, as the Chief Secretary termed it. The United Kingdom's share is £2.26 billion, and this is earmarked as budgetary support for Ukraine's military spending. I understand that it will be in addition to the UK's existing annual commitment of £3 billion of military aid. Each loan will be in the form of a bilateral loan, but will be based on common principles to ensure consistency and co-ordination between each loan.

We support the Bill and will support the Government if any other party seeks to divide this House, but I would be grateful if the Chief Secretary or the Minister could provide further clarification on several questions. The first is about disbursements to Ukraine under the extraordinary revenue acceleration loan. Point 5 in the annex to the G7 statement says:

"Loans will be fully disbursed to the benefit of Ukraine between 1 December 2024 and 31 December 2027."

The whole House will be aware of the current heightened levels of military activity and the urgent demands from Ukraine for assistance, including UK Storm Shadow missiles. What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Defence about the timings and scale of distributions?

Secondly, I want to ask about the asset base. Can the Minister update the House on the total value of Russian assets seized by the G7, and on the total assets seized by UK jurisdictions? The last estimates we had were in March 2023, when the total was £48 billion, of which £18 billion was seized by UK jurisdictions. As the extraordinary revenue acceleration loan refers only to sovereign assets, will the Minister tell us what consideration was given to the inclusion of income streams from other seized Russian assets, and why it was determined that they should not be included? Do the commitments made by each G7 country relate to the amount of Russian assets seized or held by a jurisdiction, or are



they done on some other basis? If so, what is the basis for those allocations? Can the Minister give some indication of the allocation of seized sovereign assets by type? As they are sovereign assets, I assume that many will be in the form of cash holdings, but there may be properties and other assets. It would be helpful for the House to have some understanding of the allocation of these assets by type.

Thirdly, I want to ask about the use of anticipated income streams from Russian assets to repay the loans. The Bill's explanatory notes claim:

"The extraordinary profits on the immobilised Russian sovereign assets will then be divided between the G7 lenders in proportion to their contributions. This will happen as the extraordinary profits accrue, on a 6-monthly basis...in three tranches".

I have three similar questions on this issue. Has there been any modelling of the future flows of anticipated income from seized Russian assets that will be used to repay the loans? Has the Treasury made an assessment of the expected period for their repayment? Can the Minister provide the House with a forecast or estimate for the anticipated revenues available for repayment in each of the tranches?

Fourthly, I want to ask about contingencies. There are five participants in the loan agreement: the UK, the USA, Canada, Japan and the EU. Can the Minister advise whether the terms of the agreement will still stand if one or more of the participants do not ratify it? In the event of a peace settlement, subsequent to disbursements being made, point 12 of the annexe to the ERA loan initiative says that

"the outstanding balances that cannot be covered by extraordinary profits shall be repaid by Ukraine to each lender."

Can the Minister advise whether that is the case? In such circumstances, what priority will the repayment of these loans have compared with other loans made to Ukraine?

Finally, I want to ask about the Government's overall defence expenditure. The Government's Budget committed to setting out a pathway to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP at a future fiscal event. Since then, however, Labour Ministers have been unable to confirm whether it remains Labour's ambition to meet that target by 2030. Can the Minister confirm whether it is still Labour policy to increase defence expenditure to 2.5% of GDP, when that might be reached and whether the commitments contained in this Bill will be included in such estimates?

The principles underlying the Bill are sound. Our commitment to the defence of Ukraine is reinforced. Our prayers are with the people of Ukraine and the cause of peace and freedom. We support the Bill.

3.38 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): We are now 1,000 days into the Russian invasion of Ukraine and we are entering a crucial period for Ukraine and its people, with the Kursk offensive and Administration change in the United States. I would first like to praise our Government for their evolving strong support for Ukraine, reflecting the needs on the ground. The United Kingdom was the first responder and supporter of Ukraine. The Government's participation in implementing President Zelensky's 10-point victory plan is very welcome. Ensuring that the war does not last indefinitely and

ends on fair terms is crucial. MPs of all parties work closely on campaigns around aid, sanctions, seizure of assets and so much more.

There is the potential that Ukraine could lose 50% of its military aid support from its international allies. The UK and other supportive nations struggle to make up the shortfall from our own stores. If this remains the case, Ukraine will slowly lose the ability to defend itself. Russia will increase and intensify its atrocities across the country. Where will Russia stop? The increasing rhetoric from the Kremlin needs a robust response. It has been shown again and again to take advantage of perceived weakness. Now, 1,000 days into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we can take the first step in unlocking frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine. I welcome today's Bill, which will ensure that the loans made will be repaid with the Russian state's assets currently frozen in the UK.

The G7 must act collectively on this. At the start of the war, approximately \$300 billion of Russian central bank reserves were frozen in the west. We need a route to mobilise these reserves. We must understand how other states have been able to disclose the amount of Russian central bank reserves they hold. We need to know how many billions of pounds of Russian reserves reside in the City of London. Canada has passed the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations, which collects data on Russian assets, freezes them and publishes the value, which currently stands at 135 billion Canadian dollars frozen in Canada. Can the Government move to disclose the level of Russian assets held here in a similar way?

I also wish to call for the seizure of Russian central bank reserves to pay for the defence of Ukraine. Many Governments are seizing the profit generated from the frozen money and using that to back Ukraine. The US has passed legislation giving the President the power to do that, and I welcome this legislation, which will move us in the same direction. In the UK, we also have £2.5 billion frozen from the sale of Chelsea football club. If unlocked, it could create the second wealthiest charity in Britain, but it remains frozen in a UK bank account. Can the Minister outline what steps he is taking to immediately release this funding, which would provide much-needed humanitarian aid to Ukraine? In Ukraine, winter is not coming; winter is here.

We must decide on a route to mobilise the UK's seizure of Russian assets. The estimated cost of reconstruction in Ukraine is at least \$486 billion over the next decade, and growing every day. We must begin the process of confiscating the Russian central bank reserves in the UK with this Bill. Defending Ukraine's democracy is defending our democracy. I look forward to the potential of this Bill to be a route to mobilising billions of pounds of Russian central bank reserves. Can the Minister clarify the position on whether the loans in the Bill today will be in the form of a recourse or non-recourse loan?

The Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill allows the UK to fulfil our commitment made in the June 2024 G7 loan agreement to Ukraine. The UK's expected contribution under this agreement is approximately £2.26 billion, which Ukraine can decide to utilise for its defence. We have Russian central bank deposits in the Bank of England, as well as Russian bonds that have matured and the funds deposited in UK commercial banks. Can

[Alex Sobel]

the Minister outline when we will legislate to seize these assets for the defence and reconstruction of Ukraine, as they dwarf the sums we are debating today? I conclude by again thanking Ministers in the Treasury, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Defence for their stalwart support of Ukraine. Slava Ukraini!

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

3.42 pm

**James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD):** Yesterday, Ukraine entered its 1,000th day since the start of Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion, and it is about to enter its toughest winter yet. This Bill represents a significant and welcome step in providing much-needed financial support to Ukraine as it continues its courageous resistance. It will deliver tangible assistance during this critical phase of the conflict, providing a vital lifeline to our Ukrainian allies.

Before the war, my partner and I had the good fortune to travel in Ukraine, visiting both Kyiv and Odesa. We visited modern cities similar to any other in Europe, so the sight of ordinary Ukrainian families being forced, at the start of the Russian attack, to shelter in the Kyiv underground stations that we had both so recently used for sightseeing in that beautiful city was both shocking and moving for us. It also brought home why the UK's unwavering support for Ukraine is so essential, not just for the brave people of that nation but for all of us. If liberal democratic nations do not stand together against tyranny and aggression, the tyrants will feel no constraint and the citizens of other European nations, including potentially the UK, might find that they are the ones forced into underground stations looking for shelter.

The Liberal Democrats support this Bill and its intent, but we are disappointed that it has taken so long to come to the House. My noble Friend Lord Purvis of Tweed raised this issue back in January, some 10 months ago, but now the Bill is finally here, we are pleased to see that it demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that those responsible for Ukraine's devastation—Russia and its oligarch elites—should, at the very least, contribute financially to Ukraine's recovery. However, we believe the Bill does not go far enough.

The UK should consider seizing all frozen Russian assets, not just their profits, and redirect them to aid Ukraine. With around £22 billion-worth of such assets currently held in the UK alone, the Government are missing a significant opportunity to amplify their support. Distinguished international lawyers have made a strong case for this step.

Although some economists have expressed concern about repercussions in the financial markets, we believe that, given the very specific circumstances of this conflict, the justification and the benefits far outweigh those concerns. Such action would provide an immediate and substantial financial boost to President Zelensky's forces and Ukraine's reconstruction efforts, while sending a clear message to the Kremlin that aggression against sovereign nations will have severe and lasting consequences. We therefore also back the calls for a special tribunal to

prosecute those responsible for Russia's war of aggression and to ensure accountability for the heinous crimes committed.

The Liberal Democrats have consistently called for the UK to lead by example in supporting Ukraine, extending it beyond financial assistance to include military, diplomatic and humanitarian measures. The provision of advanced weaponry, including longer-range precision arms, is critical to Ukraine's success. We must also bolster British arms and ammunition supplies, work closely with our allies to replenish stockpiles, and maintain Ukraine's defensive capabilities. It is essential that we co-ordinate effectively with NATO and the European Union to maximize collective impact, which is why I urge the Government to be bolder in their efforts to rebuild our relationship with the EU, including by deepening our security and military co-operation.

We urge the Government to build an international consensus for the proscription of the Wagner Group, whose activities represent a grave threat to international security. The UK must also take a strong stance against Russia's continuing human rights violations and support anti-war activists within Russia, many of whom face persecution for their bravery. Offering asylum to such individuals and raising their cases in international forums is not only a moral imperative but a strategic means of undermining the Kremlin's control.

It is vital to recognise that supporting Ukraine financially and militarily should not come at the expense of other nations in need. Restoring the 0.7% gross national income target for international development spending is a crucial step towards ensuring that humanitarian aid to Ukraine does not result in the neglect of our wider global responsibilities. The Government's failure to meet this target undermines Britain's reputation as a global leader in development and humanitarian support.

The Liberal Democrats also urge the Government to take robust action to close the loopholes in economic crime legislation that have allowed Putin's allies to funnel dirty money through the UK for far too long. A *Financial Times* investigation published yesterday revealed that companies in British overseas territories exported \$134 million-worth of goods to Russia in 2024, potentially breaching UK sanctions aimed at restricting access to military and high-tech supplies. I call on the Minister to give an undertaking that the Government will look to address these violations and close these loopholes.

The National Crime Agency must be properly resourced to tackle economic crime effectively, and Magnitsky sanctions should be used to target relatives and associates who attempt to evade existing measures. This is about far more than financial probity; it is about standing up for the rule of law and ensuring that our financial system cannot be used to bankroll aggression.

This Bill comes at a moment of uncertainty. The possibility of diminished US support for Ukraine, following the recent election and the imminent return of Donald Trump to the presidency, is deeply concerning. Should the United States falter in its support, Europe must step up. This should serve as a wake-up call for the UK Government to lead in Europe by seizing frozen Russian assets, reversing damaging cuts to our armed forces and strengthening co-operation with both NATO and the European Union on security and foreign policy.

With a hard winter ahead, time is of the essence. The UK must not waver in its commitment to Ukraine. This is about more than financial assistance; it is about justice, accountability and the preservation of international law. This Bill is a vital step forward, but it must not be the final word.

We must demonstrate bold leadership by acting decisively to ensure that Ukraine not only survives but prevails, and that the principles of sovereignty, freedom and democracy endure. Let this Bill be the beginning of a renewed and united effort to support Ukraine. By seizing frozen Russian assets, providing advanced military support and working closely with our allies, we can help Ukraine to secure a lasting victory and ensure a future of peace, stability and justice for Europe and beyond. Let us rise to this challenge for Ukraine, for Europe and for the values we hold dear.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call Linsey Farnsworth to make her maiden speech.

3.49 pm

**Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab):** It is a great privilege to be called to make my maiden speech in this most important debate, and it is an honour to represent the people of Amber Valley in this House.

I am proud to be part of a Government with five missions, but my sixth mission is to put Amber Valley firmly on the map. Any Members who have had the misfortune to sit with me in the Tea Room will know exactly where Amber Valley is, because it is my practice to suffix its name with “in Derbyshire”. In fact, Amber Valley is known as the heart of Derbyshire, and deservedly so, because not only is it right in the middle of our wonderful county, but its people have the biggest hearts. They are among the most friendly people in the world, but they are also unyielding. It is no surprise that they are descendants of those involved in the last revolution in England, the Pentrich revolution of 1817, during which a group of constituents plotted an armed uprising, angry about the state of the economy and demanding parliamentary reform. Hon. Members will understand my relief at being part of a Government who are committed to making people better off and reforming the House of Lords.

Originally a mining area, the local economy has since developed a diverse industrial base. I am delighted we are driving forward our industrial strategy, so that businesses such as those headquartered in Amber Valley can thrive. Firms such as Thorntons Chocolates, Denby Pottery, Bowmer and Kirkland, Berry Recycling, National Gas and David Nieper provide employment.

The last of those companies lends its name to a school in Alfreton, which it oversees. That is a fine example of business supporting the local community. The school's ethos is to ensure children can raise their aspirations, breaking down the barriers to opportunity. That is so important for our young people in Amber Valley. Youth services have been cut back, and the gap that has been left is filled by the hard work and dedication of local people, such as James at Ayup in Alfreton, and Chrissie and Mikey at Old Farm Bus in Ripley Marehay.

I am the fourth MP for Amber Valley. The first, Phillip Oppenheim, is credited for having brought the mojito to the UK. I cannot promise to do anything so exciting when I leave this place, beyond perhaps sampling one or two of those in our new bar in Alfreton. It is

aply named the Moot Bar, by virtue of its overlooking the marketplace, where moot hearings, which are believed to have led to the modern day jury system, were held to settle disputes and try offenders. It is a fitting place for a former Crown prosecutor such as myself to frequent.

The second MP was Judy Mallaber, of my party, who still makes a huge contribution to our community. Judy worked hard for the introduction of the minimum wage. I am delighted this Government are building on that legacy, increasing the national living wage and introducing the biggest improvement of workers' rights in a generation.

Most recently, Amber Valley was represented by Nigel Mills. Nigel is a thoroughly decent man, who served as a dedicated constituency MP for 14 years. He is rightly proud of being the longest serving MP for Amber Valley. I wish him well.

We have heard mention in many maiden speeches of firsts—the first female MP, the first MP for a new constituency and even the first MP with a beard. In that spirit, I found myself looking for mine. Could I be the first Crown prosecutor to enter Parliament? Rumour has it that someone has beaten me to that particular accolade. I am relieved that you are in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I also found myself googling whether I am the first MP named Linsey. I hope that does not affect my chances of Mr Speaker calling me in the future. I am, however, the first Amber Valley MP to have been born in the constituency—technically. I was born in Ilkeston, a town now in neighbouring Erewash, but at the time Ilkeston was a constituency with my three towns, so I was technically born in the constituency, but perhaps that is a lawyer's argument.

The Labour party was formed to give ordinary people a voice and to improve lives. My dad is David Farnsworth and he would say that he is an ordinary man. He also has a catchphrase: “Let me tell you a little tale.” To coin his catchphrase, I would like to tell the House a little tale about the Labour party through the life of that so-called ordinary man.

There has been much debate about what a working person is, but I know it when I see it: it is my dad. Originally a coalminer, like so many others he went into the dark so that his children's lights would shine. I am pleased the Government are returning the pension fund to miners such as my dad and the 772 former mineworkers in Amber Valley. Righting that wrong was a manifesto commitment—and we are keeping our promises.

Our lives changed when I was 12 and my mum Margaret was diagnosed with cancer. She was one of the most caring people, always putting others first. Her late diagnosis was a result of her not wanting to be a burden on our already overstretched NHS. She died less than two months later. I do not want any family in Amber Valley to go through that. This Government will get our NHS back on its feet—we must.

After my mum died and the pits closed, my dad was out of work. The Labour Government gave him the opportunity to retrain as a bricklayer. He attended what was then South East Derbyshire College in Heanor, in a beautiful Victorian building. Long since closed and left derelict, it is now being refurbished and will house small businesses and provide community space. Together with the newly renovated marketplace, the Labour-controlled borough council is ensuring that Heanor town centre will be a welcoming place for residents to visit, while boosting our local economy.



[Linsey Farnsworth]

My dad went on to build hundreds of houses and, had he not retired, I am sure he would be building his fair share of the 1.5 million homes that we have promised to provide within this Parliament. My dad would say that he is an ordinary man. I say “would say” because he cannot any more. Dementia has taken his voice. My wonderful stepmum Kate cares for him. She is one of the 5.2 million unpaid carers in the UK. I am glad that this Government are improving carer’s allowance, but we must go further and create a national care service.

My dad would say that he is an ordinary man. I say that he is extraordinary, for it is his values and guidance that have led me to this place. My upbringing instilled in me a drive—a drive to make society fairer. That led me to serve as a Crown prosecutor for 21 years, working to secure justice for victims. It was, until my election to this place, the greatest honour of my life. I intend to continue to fight for justice, to fight for those suffering injustice and to use my voice for the people of Amber Valley.

My goal to combat injustice extends particularly to the people of Ukraine. I visited Ukraine in September with fellow Labour MPs. We saw the human suffering of war: the homes destroyed, the children’s cardiology hospital bombed while young children were on the operating table, the cellar of a school where civilians were held captive by Russian troops in the most appalling conditions. Ukraine is defending herself, but she is also defending us, our values and our freedoms. We must do everything we can to support Ukraine both now and for the rebuild after the conflict is over, and I fully support the Bill.

We must deliver on our promises to rebuild trust in politics and show that it can be a force for good. My children have given me the affectionate nickname, “the vicious dictator”. I am not sure whether I am best placed to lead on this, but I shall try. I promise, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my home is not a dictatorship, but it can be seen through a political lens. My eldest son once made a placard at bedtime with the slogan, “We want another story and we want it now”. He was a strong campaigner even at the tender age of 10—he is now 17. My youngest son is an effective lobbyist, as his collection of trainers will attest. My stepdaughter is chief whip, managing to bring together the boys even in the most challenging of debates. My brilliant husband Martin makes a wonderful Speaker of our House, keeping order and holding it all together. We all know that politics is all-consuming and hugely onerous on families. The love, understanding and support that Martin and our children have given me has been integral to my being in this place.

No maiden speech for Amber Valley would be complete without mentioning Butterley Engineering, around which the town of Ripley was founded. Sadly no longer open, it leaves behind a blast furnace wall and an underground wharf, both now scheduled monuments. Friends of Butterley Ironworks Trust are hoping to turn this heritage into good use with a visitors’ centre. I will happily support them with that. Butterley Ironworks may be gone, but there is a reminder for me twice weekly, as I walk under the iron arches in St Pancras train station and pass the sign that reads, “Manufactured by the Butterley Company, Derbyshire, 1867”. The majesty of those iron arches is a constant link between representing

Amber Valley in this place and the people responsible for sending me here, who I thank greatly and promise to serve in the spirit of the Amber Valley motto, “Per laborem progredimur”—“We progress through hard work”.

4.2 pm

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) for her excellent maiden speech. She spoke movingly and touchingly about her father and about dementia, and it is a theme that we must come back to in this House. It is really profound. I also share her admiration for Nigel Mills, who was an excellent predecessor, and she was very magnanimous in her comments about him. I will be sure to see her in the Tea Room to hear more about Derbyshire. Hopefully, she will not be dictating that I drink a Mojito, because I cannot bear them.

I understand that the Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill is being steered through the House by the Treasury—quite right too—but I think it would be worth my saying at the outset why the Bill is a positive development in security, defence and foreign affairs.

In December 2021, amid the build-up of Russian troops on the border of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin wrote two letters. He wrote one to the United States and one to NATO. His demands included a Russian veto on NATO membership for Ukraine and the implied removal of US nuclear weapons from Europe and the withdrawal of multinational NATO battalions from Poland and from the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. That would have been completely and utterly unacceptable, and we can only surmise why he might have wanted NATO to act in this way. It is because once ground is taken it is that much harder to take back. Offence is so much more costly than defence.

It is to the issue of costs that we must now turn. The purpose of the Bill is to support the \$50 billion G7 initiative launched in June, which represented a co-ordinated effort by the G7 and the EU to support Ukraine. However, with Hungary potentially blocking concerted EU action, I welcome the provision in the Bill that will ensure that future financial assistance extends to any changes in subsequent arrangements, in case we can reach broader consensus later. It is crucial that we collaborate with our EU partners to swiftly advance the agreement.

The Minister talked about the UK being a first mover in this space, which is very welcome, although states such as Estonia, Finland and Czechia worked on it prior to us, and Canada has been a driver of it too. The UK’s £2.26 billion contribution to the G7 arrangement reflects our GDP share, but as a leader in supporting Ukraine, I feel we need to go beyond simply a proportional share. After all, doing so could provide support for Ukraine in place of some taxpayers’ money. It is welcome that the UK is contributing £3 billion annually, and the Government have pledged to maintain that for as long as it takes, but as Zelensky said, why should western taxpayers foot the bill when frozen Russian assets could be confiscated and given for use by Ukraine? The Bill is a positive step, but we should talk about not just future profits generated from frozen Russian assets, but the principle—the assets themselves. The approach set out today uses only a fraction of the \$300 billion available, much of which is held at Euroclear central securities

depository. To support Ukraine effectively, we must go further. We should repurpose all these assets—not just the profits, but the principle.

Some critics argue that confiscating the funds would pose legal risks. They talk about sovereign immunity—an argument that is also used by some who oppose the prosecution of leaders for the crime of aggression—but sovereign immunity should also apply when thinking about the sovereignty of states. Legally, we have to think about how Russia violated international law. It violated the UN charter and blatantly breached the charter's principle of state sovereignty. It is estimated that Russia has already caused £400 billion worth of damage—that is what will be required to rebuild Ukraine—and Russia will ultimately have to pay to make good that damage, but what use will the frozen assets be to Ukraine if Ukraine no longer exists? The goal cannot be only to rebuild Ukraine from the rubble, but to help Ukrainians prevent their country from turning to ash.

Some argue that confiscating the assets could destabilise global markets, or deter other nations from holding reserves in western financial institutions in the future, but those fears are overstated, and need to be weighed against the risk of doing nothing. The dominance of western financial systems remains robust. Alternatives such as China's renminbi lack the stability and scale of the US dollar. Cryptocurrencies are too volatile to be a viable alternative, so the risk of inaction should be thought of in terms of what has happened in global markets since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. There was a very wobbly period, including here in the UK with the Liz Truss mini-Budget, which was partly about supporting people with their energy bills. At the time, the Government felt that they had to provide such support because of the rise in the price of gas caused by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Again, we cannot just suppose that doing nothing will have no consequences. There are concerns that confiscation could reduce our leverage in future peace negotiations, but this war first needs to be won. This is not the Gulf war in 1991 when frozen assets were used to compensate Kuwait; this war is still not determined.

Other states considering investing in western institutions have nothing to fear if they have no intention of invading their neighbours. As things stand, Russia has shown little interest in meaningful dialogue. To simply wait and keep the assets as a negotiating tool is naive and defeatist. By repurposing the assets now, we not only support Ukraine's immediate needs, but reinforce the principle that aggression must not pay and that nuclear sabre-rattling is completely unacceptable.

As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (James MacCleary), said, the geopolitical context underscores the urgency of the moment. Trump commented in March that he sees US isolationism as attractive. When talking to the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) on GB News, he said,

“We have an ocean in between some problems... a nice big, beautiful ocean.”

With the United States facing questions about whether its support for Ukraine could be reduced or even diminish, we need to think further about what more we can do with our European allies. Acting now to unlock the full potential of Russian assets would provide Ukraine with a financial lifeline insulating it from shifts in political will elsewhere in the world.

The Bill highlights the importance of collaboration with our European partners. As the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), pointed out, UK taxpayers have already contributed over £12 billion in aid to Ukraine since February 2022, but our absence from EU defence frameworks limits our ability to co-ordinate effectively with those European allies. We could use some of the confiscated frozen assets to support joint procurement, perhaps associating with some of the frameworks, such as the European Defence Agency. Shared management of those confiscated funds would ensure transparency, accountability and maximum impact. The future profit funds, suggested as a base for the Bill, are scheduled to be disbursed between December 2024 and 2027. That timeline does not match the urgency of Ukraine's need.

Just last weekend, we saw Russia's largest attack on Ukrainian infrastructure in months. Russia launched 120 missiles and 90 drones. Three weeks ago, the Finnish Government took a bold step by confiscating \$4.5 billion in Russian assets, making Finland one of the first countries to take decisive action. The Finnish confiscation must surely be hitting Russia where it hurts, and we should follow the examples set by Finland, Czechia and Estonia, working together to confiscate those Russian assets—including the principal, not just the interest.

The stakes could not be higher: Ukraine's fight is a fight for eastern Europe and the west more broadly. It is a fight for the principles of democracy, sovereignty and international law that underpin global peace and security. I welcome the Bill, but it is vital that the provisions align with the goal of confiscating all Russian assets to support Ukraine financially. Let us rise to the challenge, demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine, and show leadership on the global stage and unwavering friendship to our European allies. By collaborating with those European allies to confiscate Russian assets, we can help pave the way for an outcome that makes it plain to any Government who are watching that aggression does not pay.

4.13 pm

**Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to have heard the beautiful maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth), whose father must be really proud.

It is excellent to hear the details of the Bill, but Russia's continued assault on Ukraine is absolutely terrifying. We must not buy into a narrative of peace on Russia's terms; that would be tantamount to appeasement. A sovereign, democratic country ceding territory to an aggressive imperial country basically takes us back to world war two—an idea that I find absolutely terrifying. It would completely embolden Putin, and eastern Europe and the Baltic would be next on his target list.

It is completely right to say that defence of the UK starts in Ukraine. We are doing everything we can to support Ukraine. It was great to hear about the 50,000 Ukrainian troops who have been trained by the UK through Operation Interflex, and I am glad that that policy is being extended. It is excellent to hear about the military support that we are providing to Ukraine, including the Storm Shadow missiles that we are hearing about in the media at the moment. I trained on those weapons, and I hope that they can help to take the fight to the Russians. It is also excellent to hear that

[Alex Ballinger]

we are providing financial support of £12.8 billion, as well as an additional £2.26 billion from interest on seized Russian assets.

Unfortunately, 1,000 days since the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian economy is, despite sanctions, doing better than many of us expected at the start of the conflict. However, the Russians do face challenges, including the highest casualty rate since the conflict began, higher interest rates, and now a labour shortage in the Russian economy. We must sustain our support for Ukraine and increase the pressure on Russia, which cannot be allowed to succeed.

The Bill is an important step in sustaining our support for Ukraine. The £2.26 billion will help Ukraine to invest in air defence, artillery and other military equipment. I fully support the Bill, but I have a couple of questions for the Minister. What more can be done to seize frozen Russian assets? I think in particular of the £2.25 billion from the sale of Chelsea football club, and other assets that must be held in the City of London. We must use everything in our arsenal, and I would like the UK Government to do more to seize and use such assets, rather than using just the interest, as we are committed to doing at the moment. Will she confirm whether this is a non-recourse or recourse loan? It is important that, if the interest from Russian assets is not what we expect it to be, there is no expectation on the Ukrainians, given all the difficulties that they are facing, to repay the bill.

4.16 pm

**Stephen Gethins** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) on her maiden speech. It was so lovely to hear about her family. I was encouraged to hear about her revolutionary constituents who were keen on parliamentary reform. They will certainly have plenty of support from Scottish National party Members in those ambitions.

I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill to the Chamber. We are now 1,000 days on from the full-scale invasion, but it has been well over 10 years since Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine. I reassert First Minister John Swinney's acknowledgment of that anniversary yesterday, and the continued commitment to Ukraine of my party and the Scottish Government. This issue cuts across the Chamber, and it is good to see so much unanimity on it.

Why is that important? Because the Ukrainians are fighting for each and every one of us who values democracy, liberty and independence across Europe. They are the frontline defending us and those we represent, as well as our friends and colleagues around Europe. Sometimes, it is easy to lose sight of that. The Bill is about aiding Ukraine, but it is also about investing in our own security. This is a national security issue, and it is a good investment for us.

Let us think for a moment about the consequences of not supplying, arming and providing finance to Ukraine. It would mean a collapse and one of the worst refugee crises that Europe has ever experienced. It would mean a hit to the rules-based system, which I suspect those of us who believe in that system would see as difficult to recover from. Bluntly, it would mean a broadening of

the war. Vladimir Putin is not stopping in Ukraine in the same way that he did not stop in Georgia, Chechnya, Syria, Libya—you name it.

Although we are absolutely supportive of the Bill, which certainly has my party's support, I will pick up on a couple of points that have been raised, on which clarification would be helpful. I agree with the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary), who said that this Bill does not go far enough. From an arms and security perspective, we often provide supplies to Ukraine that allow it to fight and not lose the war, but not to win it. That goes for the arms and the finances being supplied.

I will pick up on a point made quite rightly by the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord). There are \$300 billion-worth of frozen assets. I know that the Minister will not be able to pick up on this today, and it is not part of the Bill, but I encourage her to come back to the Chamber at some point and provide us with an update. She will find that she has support across the Chamber. I know that this issue is not easy and is about building links with other partners, and there will be some resistance to that, but the amount of money in the Bill, which I acknowledge is an important contribution, is dwarfed in scale by the amount of finances that it could provide by unfreezing those assets.

The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth also made a point about sovereign immunity. Russia gave up its sovereign immunity when it launched the full-scale invasion and therefore forced this war on the sovereignty of Ukraine. We also have the principle of the universality of certain crimes, and we have seen allegations about universal crimes committed in Ukraine, with very substantial evidence. That is obviously a matter for the International Criminal Court, but I encourage lawyers to look into the principle of universality on some of the issues in that area. I know that the Minister is sympathetic and that this is not entirely as simple as many of us would like it to be, but from the comments we have heard from across the Chamber, there appears to be a great deal of support for the unfreezing of those assets. It would be fantastic to see the UK Government provide leadership in that area.

I also point to the fact that we have seen fantastic leadership from the Czechs, Estonians and Finns. What makes their leadership so compelling is that they know what happens if we give in to Russian aggression. They know at first hand and have generational knowledge within living memory of what happens when we give in to this kind of aggression. I encourage the Minister to look into that and endorse the points made about the sale of the proceeds from Chelsea football club, which is also very significant. That \$300 billion would be transformative in helping Ukraine to fight this war for all of us.

I also ask the Minister about the broader finance issue of the effectiveness of sanctions. We know that Russia has been able to get around sanctions, but we must redouble our efforts. I make reference to a report that I was involved in writing when I sat on the Foreign Affairs Committee, which was on Moscow's gold and dirty money. There were allegations about some of that money was going through London. I refer the Minister's Treasury colleagues to have a look at that; it was a very good bit of work undertaken on a cross-party basis. This issue is crucial.



My final point is that our time is limited. We have a new Administration coming in in the United States in January, and we know that the signs are not entirely promising in terms of the support that we have seen from the United States in recent years. This war should actually have been a wake-up call to all of us in Europe 10 years ago. Given the fact that we have had this election in the United States, we are very late to the party on this issue, but we have a huge responsibility to pull together as Europeans. The Ukrainians are on the frontline and deserve our support. This is an investment in our own security. I absolutely support the Bill, but we need to go that little bit further.

4.23 pm

**Tim Roca** (Macclesfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) on her fantastic maiden speech. She is a really powerful advocate for her constituents. She talked movingly about her father losing his voice, but she has certainly found hers in this place. I was with her on that visit to Ukraine in September, and I still find it incredible that in this day and age, in 2024, it is possible to visit the capital city of a fellow democracy on the European continent and hear air raid sirens and see civilians—women and children—heading for air raid shelters. That is the dystopian future that Vladimir Putin has set out for Ukraine in this terrible war, but also potentially for the rest of the continent if we do not get our act together.

Several times this afternoon, hon. Members have made the powerful point that this is an existential war for the people of Ukraine. They are not fighting for some unforeseeable future, but to ensure their national independence and preserve their sovereignty. Some 3 million Ukrainians are living under occupation at the moment, and the people of Ukraine know what the full occupation of their country would entail: the destruction of their national life and of their liberty. We know this because, despite Vladimir Putin's mendaciousness, he has set out time and again his historical worldview—his perverted sense of world history and Russian revanchism. There is the essay that he published just before the invasion and the strange speech he gave on the eve of the invasion itself, in which he basically posited the idea that Ukraine was not a real country. Well, it has very much proved to be a real country, and it has defeated him in his evil ambitions for the past two years.

Because this war is existential and because it is crucial for the defence of this country, we have a duty to be realistic. I do not expect Ministers to comment on this today, but we in this Chamber are all very much aware that there has been a sea change in American politics, and that the comments from people who will either be part of the future Administration, or are likely to be part of it, suggest that the United States' support for Ukraine might not be what it has been. That brings me to the issue that the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) mentioned, which is that we are running up against the clock. We have limited time. We have to be realistic: there is a new Administration coming in, so Europe has to pick up the slack and provide greater leadership.

However, we are also seeing massive changes in Europe. On the day that President Trump was elected, the German Government began to fall apart, and in France, we are seeing a presidency stumble towards the end of its term.

The United Kingdom is the country that has to provide the leadership in Europe on these matters, as it has done since the start of the war, but we need to go even further.

The support that Ukraine gets at the moment is already subject to so many restrictions. It has been drip-fed to them over the past two years, rather than giving them what they need right away, which has potentially made the war longer. We have not given the Ukrainians the tools they have needed when they have asked for them. Ukrainians talk about the “long yes”, where European partners say “Yes, of course” and promise delivery of arms, but those arms take months or even years to arrive and make a difference on the battlefield. I wonder whether we would be in a different place if all the systems that have eventually been given to Ukraine had been given at the start of the war.

This Bill is absolutely crucial, as various Members have said, and I support it. I think it is extremely important, but Members have also talked about going further with Russian assets. I can completely understand why, a year or 18 months ago, it might have been rational to think that those assets could be used during the peace negotiations—that they could potentially be the source of funding for rebuilding Ukraine. However, as Members have pointed out several times, there may not be a Ukraine if this war is not won. That is why we have to give serious consideration to unlocking those funds and using them now for the defence of Ukraine.

The last time this country was fighting for its life, in 1940, there was also a presidential election. We were much luckier back then, because both the Democratic and Republican candidates were stalwart allies of the UK in its fight against fascism. This election has changed things, but going back to that time, when President Roosevelt announced lend-lease, he said that when your neighbour's house is on fire, you do not haggle over the cost of the hose. You give them the hose—you give them what they need to put out the fire—and then you go back to the details later. That is the attitude European partners should have towards the defence of Ukraine.

Earlier today, I mentioned that one of the Defence Ministers has said that the world is becoming darker every day. If this war is not won, the world will be plunged into darkness, because it will send an incredibly dangerous message to other autocracies around the world about the rules-based order and “might is right”, and the refugee crisis that we see here in Europe at the moment will pale into insignificance as millions of Ukrainians flee the prospect of living under Vladimir Putin's tyranny. As such, I welcome this Bill, but like many colleagues, I hope to see Britain's leadership continue to grow and for us to go further, seizing Russian assets and giving the Ukrainian people what they need.

4.29 pm

**Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I, too, start by congratulating the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth). Every time I hear someone give a maiden speech in this Chamber, I am really heartened by the passion and expertise of the new intake. As I said in my maiden speech, it is clear that we are going to have not just a good Parliament, but a great Parliament. I look forward to it very much. I welcome the Minister's speech and the Bill. As is usual on Ukraine, there is

[Mike Martin]

agreement across the House. I was not quite expecting this degree of agreement on going further—on not just seizing interest or making loans, but going after assets.

This Bill fulfils the UK's part of an agreement that the G7 made in June, and we of course want to fulfil our commitments. However, the commitment in that agreement was made before the recent election in the US. As many Members across the House have said, including most recently the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), the security calculus that Europe has applied for the last 80 years has now changed. We can no longer rely on an American security umbrella. NATO is the cornerstone of our defence—there is no disagreement about that in the House. The Government talks of NATO first, but NATO does not work without an American security guarantee, American logistics, or the American backbone that runs through it. It is the same with Ukraine. Since the outbreak of the war in February 2022, the United States has provided approximately 50% of the support for Ukraine. The UK led; that is something that the previous right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip got absolutely right. However, we now face a world in which that support may be withdrawn, and that is not just a supposition. President-elect Trump has said that the Russians can

“do whatever the hell they want”

in Europe. This is a huge problem. We should have woken up to this five or 10 years ago. The fact that we are dealing with it now—well, I hope we are—should arouse the interest of Members in the Chamber today.

I want to outline what the consequences may be of a withdrawal of US support from Ukraine. We may end up with a grubby little deal that would involve taking a marker pen and drawing through Ukraine on a map. The problem with that is that this war is not about territory; those who understand it to be about territory misunderstand it. It is about identity. Russia sees Ukraine as part of its imperial identity. If Ukraine exists as an independent country, then Russia does not exist as an imperial country. It is that simple. We are trying to define the conflict by way of territory, but that it is not how Vladimir Putin sees it.

We may end up with a grubby deal; in effect, the US will withdraw support, and Ukraine will be forced to come to the negotiating table. A line will be drawn on the map through Kharkiv, Donbas and Kherson. However, Vladimir Putin will not stop there. Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are all allies of ours that the United Kingdom has pledged to defend through NATO, under article 5. If Putin took a bite from Lithuania, and Britain and France stepped forward to defend it, as we are pledged to do under article 5, we would have a huge problem if we then heard from Washington that the US would not follow us.

Even if we do not get a grubby deal that empowers Vladimir Putin, we could end up with the collapse of the Ukrainian frontlines, if the Americans withdraw their support and the Ukrainians decide to fight on. If I was Ukrainian, I would fight on, because of what the Russians did in Bucha and their kidnapping of Ukrainian children. The Ukrainians may fight on, but the frontlines may collapse.

The hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Stephen Gethins) spoke about a refugee crisis. The UN in Kyiv recently carried out a study of the crisis that could follow a collapse of the Ukrainian domestic power system. As we know, the Russians are targeting it at the moment. The UN estimated that between 5 million and 10 million Ukrainians would leave and move into western Europe—and that is just on the collapse of the power system. What would occur if the frontlines collapsed and the murderous, genocidal Russian army started to rampage through western Ukraine?

If we step outside Europe and look at possible consequences of a Ukrainian defeat, we can see that the idea of nuclear proliferation being kept under wraps, which we have cherished for the past 50, 60 or 70 years, would be under threat. The lesson we learn from the conflict is that if a state has nuclear weapons, it can bully its way into invading other states. Iran and other countries will see this and think, “That is something we need to get.” Colleagues have mentioned other autocratic states. China is watching what is happening in Ukraine carefully, as well as the western, European and American response. If we lose in Ukraine, we can kiss goodbye to Taiwan.

This is an existential conflict for Ukraine, in which it must succeed. The Bill goes some way to helping with that, but not far enough. The west collectively has \$300 billion of Russian assets. Some \$200 billion of those are in Belgium in Euroclear. To put that in context, the US has to date donated or pledged to donate approximately \$180 billion to Ukraine, so the total amount of Russian assets we hold is 50% more than the total spend so far from the United States on the war. Given that we may well be losing US support for Ukraine, with all the second-order effects that has for our security, why are we not considering much more carefully sequestering and using those assets for the defence of Ukraine? If not now, when?

4.38 pm

**Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): May I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) on her excellent maiden speech? I have heard that former Crown prosecutors can go far in this place, and I am sure that she will.

I rise to speak in strong support of the Bill, and I am grateful to colleagues for showing their support for it, because it is essential to the UK's continued steadfast support for Ukraine as it defends itself against Russia's illegal and brutal invasion. Through the Bill, the Labour Government will ensure that funds derived from sanctioned Russian sovereign assets—assets that were once used to fuel Putin's war machine—will help Ukraine in its fight for freedom. That is not only morally right but in Britain's national interest, as so many hon. Members have said. Supporting Ukraine means supporting the frontline of our democracy and our shared values of liberty and self-determination.

Most Members of the House recognise that it is critical to stand with Ukraine, but I am deeply disappointed that some question our unwavering support. Some have suggested that concessions should be made on both sides in this war, as if there is some kind of equivalence between Ukraine's fight for its freedom and Russia's criminal and illegal invasion. Let us be absolutely clear

that calls for concessions send the wrong message to Ukraine, the world and future generations. These calls undermine Ukraine's sovereignty, reward Putin's recklessness and disregard the horrific suffering that has been inflicted on the Ukrainian people.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is right to mention what the future holds. We all want peace, Ukrainians above all, but that peace must be based on justice, and we in this House must commit to that. The message from this House today should not be about the Ukrainians under pressure from Russian troops, but about our commitment in this House to them. We can influence the United States President to ensure that things look more positive for Ukraine. Does the hon. Member agree that that has to be the message that we send from this House?

**Jacob Collier:** I now have a parliamentary medal: I have taken an intervention from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I am grateful, and I agree with what he said.

Some of the views that we hear are a dangerous form of appeasement that only emboldens the aggressor and undermines the cause of peace, freedom and democracy. That weakens Ukraine, our position and the values that we in this House should defend. We must reject such defeatism and appeasement, and we must stand firm in the face of tyranny, for Ukraine and for the values that we hold dear in this democracy. To do anything less is to surrender our ideals, and that is not an option.

The Bill demonstrates that this Government are committed to doing the opposite. It builds on our already substantial support, including £3 billion in annual military aid and £2.3 billion in additional funding, drawn from immobilised Russian assets. It also enables the UK's £2.26 billion contribution to the G7's extraordinary loan scheme. This funding will directly support Ukraine's defence by providing vital air defence systems, artillery and armoured vehicles. That support is vital, not only for Ukraine but for the security of the UK and the wider world. As the Chief Secretary to the Treasury rightly highlighted, a safe and secure Ukraine means a safe and secure United Kingdom.

It is testament to our country's leadership on the global stage, and a point of pride, that the issue has had cross-party support in this Parliament. The Prime Minister's commitment to continued military aid, and the UK's role in driving the largest sanctions package ever imposed on a major economy, reflect our iron-clad determination to hold Russia to account. Putin is now 1,000 days into a war that he thought would last just a few. His miscalculation has drained Russia's economy; 40% of its annual budget is now consumed by the war effort. His forces have suffered their highest rate of casualties since the conflict began. This is no time for us to falter.

I pay tribute to the bravery of the Ukrainian armed forces, and the crucial work of the UK armed forces in training their Ukrainian counterparts. Let me say how proud I am of our troops' vital contributions to Ukraine's defence efforts—a pride that was reinforced by my visit to the 29th Regiment Royal Logistic Corps and the Commando Training Centre Royal Marines. Seeing their dedication at first hand was a reminder of the professionalism and commitment of our armed forces, who are making a tangible difference in Ukraine's fight

for freedom. The unity of this House, our Government and our allies is essential to ensure that Ukraine has the resources that it needs to prevail. Let us send a clear message today: Britain will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.

4.44 pm

**James Naish** (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) on her wonderful maiden speech—actually, I have actually shifted up to sit in her spot so that I can accept all the plaudits that are coming from others. Yesterday marked 1,000 days since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. One thousand days later, missiles and bombs continue to rain down on sleeping civilians, Ukraine's critical energy infrastructure is targeted, and in the south and east of the country, approximately 3 million Ukrainians live in occupied territories, where their human rights are routinely violated. The Ukrainians living under occupation must be liberated. Ukrainians across the rest of the country must be able to move on with their lives in peace, without fear of being bombarded.

The Bill provides the Government with the spending authority to provide an additional £2.26 billion in financial assistance to Ukraine, paid for not by the British taxpayer, but through the extraordinary profits made on immobilised Russian sovereign assets. Many of my Rushcliffe constituents will welcome this very serious and sensible proposal, which gives Ukrainians more tools to defend themselves, and would join some of the calls today to look at ways in which we may be able to go still further.

I trust that the House will join me in paying tribute to the Ukrainian armed forces who are fighting so valiantly to defend their country and their democracy, and to the members of our UK armed forces who are involved in training Ukrainian armed forces in the UK through Operation Interflex, which has now trained more than 50,000 Ukrainian recruits. That includes Nottinghamshire armed forces personnel, such as Corporal James Noble of C Company 4 Mercian, who spoke publicly about the training. Describing its impact, he recalled:

"Completely out of the blue, a Ukrainian soldier came over to me with a picture on his phone and said: 'This is my wife and this is my young child. Thanks to you and what you've done, I have a much greater chance of living to see them again.'"

In Rushcliffe, many of my constituents will welcome the Bill. Since the full-scale invasion started, over 300 Ukrainians fleeing the war have been sponsored by Rushcliffe residents as part of the Homes for Ukraine scheme. From a solidarity march in West Bridgford to a concert for Ukraine in Keyworth that raised £1,800, so many of my constituents have done what they can to support the Ukrainian people and they will welcome the Government using profits made on immobilised Russian sovereign assets to support Ukraine during its darkest hour.

We have the opportunity today to progress legislation that will unlock vital additional funding for Ukraine to invest in more of the equipment that it needs to defend itself from Russia's illegal invasion. That additional funding comes on top of the UK's existing £3 billion a year for military aid for Ukraine. Our support for Ukraine is iron-clad, as it should be. I therefore support the Government and commend the Bill to the House.



4.48 pm

**Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I wish to associate myself with the comments of many other Members who congratulated my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) on her wonderful maiden speech. She spoke particularly movingly about the impact that being in this place has on our families. I am sure that all of us will be thinking of our friends and family as we think back on that speech.

I am proud to speak in support of the Bill. I am proud of the additional money that is being provided for the defence of Ukraine and its people. I am proud that the sum of £2.26 billion, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) said, is in addition to the £3 billion that has been committed each year. I am proud, too, that this House stands for Ukraine and democracy, and in opposition to Putin and tyranny. That position is shared almost universally across this House, and certainly universally in this debate.

In my early contributions in this place, I have spent much of my time decrying the legacy of the last Conservative Government. I dare say I will do that a few more times, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I certainly will not be doing that on Ukraine. One area in which the last Government deserve real praise is their support for the Ukrainian people. In their darkest hour, this House and this country stood as one—in defence of Ukraine, in defence of democracy, in defence of freedom.

At a time when the opinion of politics and politicians is low, I think it speaks well of the House that we can come together on issues of such great magnitude. The support for the people of Ukraine under the last Government and under this Government make me proud to be British, and proud to be a Member of this House, because defending Ukraine, its independence and its way of life, is also defending our way of life. It is drawing a line in the sand and saying to those who wish to tear up our democracy and subvert our society that we will not stand idly by. I am sure that I am not the only Member to have stood at his or her local cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday or Armistice Day and thought of those who are fighting right now for their freedom and for their loved ones in Ukraine.

At the same time, we must not think that those who are taking on Russian aggression are solely those on the frontline. This war is being fought with more than just bombs, bullets and missiles. It is fought by the families who keep on living despite the presence of a dictator who wishes to snuff out the existence of their nation. It is fought by those who are willing to say, in this House and anywhere else where speech is free, that Vladimir Putin is an illegitimate tyrant. It is fought by those inside Russia who stand—or seek to stand—in democratic elections, knowing that the elections in which they stand are neither free nor fair, but doing so anyway. It is fought through the dignity and defiance of those nations who also stand on the border of the Russian aggressor state, wishing only to remain free. We must stand with them too.

Across the UK, including in Gateshead and Whickham, people have taken Ukrainian refugees into their homes. They have made them welcome. They too are part of the fight for dignity and democracy. Today we take the next critical step in that fight, at a time when, as has been said, it is more urgent than ever. We do not know

when this war will end, but we do know that it must end, and how it must end: with a peace that is just for the Ukrainian. Slava Ukraini: glory to Ukraine.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** We now come to the final Back-Bench contribution.

4.52 pm

**Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I sincerely hope to be last but not least.

Let me begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) on her first speech in the Chamber. I too, like many Members who are present today, am relatively new to the House, and I do not think I will ever forget the first time I walked into the Chamber with that real sense of awe that we have when we walk in here. We are faced with the history of this place which stretches back for centuries—the ideas that have been debated, discussed and decided in this room—but we are on the next page. This debate, and the debates that we will have over the coming months and years, are the next step on that journey, the next page of that history, and as we move forward we must continue to remember our place in the story—a story of the importance of democracy and the importance of ordinary people standing up, having their say and ensuring that ideas such as democracy, justice and self-determination are never forgotten, and are always close to the forefront of what happens in this place, in this country and around the world.

We should be proud of the history of this place in defending those ideals, as I am proud of this country's support for Ukraine. I am also proud of the support from people throughout my constituency, in Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages, who have thrown open their homes to welcome those who have been displaced from Ukraine. It is heartening to see how many people across the country have acted so quickly in saying, "These are our friends—these are people who are in need", and making sure that there was a place for them to come and to be safe. Let us make no bones about it: the Ukrainians are defending our values. They are Europe's eastern flank, and Europe's bulwark against autocracy. The fight in which they are involved, the fierce fighting that is taking place, is not for some nebulous idea; it is not for drawing lines on a map; it is for something as fundamental as the values that we hold dear.

I think it is important for us to remember where we want to be when those next pages of the history of this place are written. What do we want it to say? I know that when I play my part in that, I want it to say that I was on the right side of history—on the side of our values, justice and democracy. That is why I support the Bill, so that we can provide support to Ukraine. More than that, I want to be part of sending a message—a G7 message, a NATO message, a European message—to Washington about the importance of supporting Ukraine, and part of sending a very strong message to Moscow, and its supporters in Tehran, Pyongyang and anywhere else that supports this illegal war in Ukraine, that it has to stop. But it can only stop with a Ukrainian victory. Slava Ukraini.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** We now come to the Front Benchers, starting with the shadow Minister.

4.55 pm

**Richard Fuller:** I will respond briefly to the debate for the Opposition. First, I commend all the speakers, and particularly the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth). It is rare for so many in this House to congratulate a Member on their maiden speech, but it was warranted because she spoke so nicely and kindly about her constituency, as well as with great generosity about her predecessor and very movingly about her father. She should take away the great support from all Members across the House, and we wish her the best of luck in her future here.

The Minister will be aware, having listened to the debate, of the comprehensive support for the Bill. She will have heard calls from some quarters to extend the provisions of the Bill to include seizing not only proceeds from the profits, but the assets. Such a move would be a very large step for the UK to take, and I do not think the official Opposition would support that without very strong convincing from the Government. But on all the other aspects, she will have seen the comprehensive support.

**Stephen Gethins:** On the seizure of assets and the \$300 billion, we were trying to make the point that this needs to be explored very seriously. It would be transformative for the Ukrainian war effort and would therefore be transformative for our security. I take on board the hon. Gentleman's point that this is not easy and about the impact that it might have. However, will he join me in encouraging the Treasury to look at this and come back to us with further details about the possible implications and how it might take this forward, so that we can all, as a House, examine it in greater detail?

**Richard Fuller:** I think I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Treasury looks at these options on a continuing basis, but, consistently, the point of view held by the previous Government—and I would assume by the current Government—is that that is not the right step to take. But perhaps the Minister will update the House on her views on that in a moment.

Given the support, there was the opportunity for the Government to move forward with all stages of the Bill, so that it could proceed and be completed in this House today. Will the Minister say why that decision was not made and perhaps provide some sense of the timetable for when the Bill will be brought to the House for its concluding stages? But the Opposition's general message is that we fully support the intentions of the Bill, and we will support it on Second Reading.

4.59 pm

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Tulip Siddiq):** It is a pleasure to close this debate on what remains a very important and pressing issue. As Ukraine enters yet another difficult winter, I am proud of the consistent support that this Government have shown through not just our £2.26 billion ERA contribution, but the long-term commitments we have made to supporting Ukraine's capacity for self-defence.

I join the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), and my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, along with my hon. Friends the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter

(Jacob Collier) and for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson) in saying how proud I am that there is unity across the House in standing shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine at this very difficult time. This is a complex issue, and I will try to answer the questions posed by the Opposition and my hon. Friends. If I have missed out anything, I am happy to write to Members.

Before I get into the nitty-gritty of the Bill, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) for making such a powerful maiden speech. I think I am right in saying that her late mother Margaret, David, Martin and all her children would be extremely proud of their extraordinary daughter, mother, stepmother and wife. I very much welcome this "vicious dictator" to the House. We need more of them in the women's parliamentary Labour party, so I am pleased to have her here.

The hon. Member for North Bedfordshire asked about the timing of the release of the funds. We intend to begin spending the funds early next year to ensure that the funding supports our Ukrainian allies as soon as possible. We intend to do so in three equal tranches over three financial years, starting in 2024-25, and the G7 has agreed that all ERA funds will be given out by the end of 2027. He also asked about how the UK will be repaid. We are providing the funding as part of the wider G7's extraordinary revenue acceleration loan initiative, which means that the UK will be repaid via the extraordinary profits generated from immobilised Russian sovereign assets in the EU. The EU has already enacted the necessary regulations to operationalise the Ukraine loan co-operation mechanism, which will distribute the profits. That came into effect on 29 October, as he is probably aware.

The hon. Member asked about what will happen to the UK if the loan is not repaid. The repayment will rely on profits continuing to flow from immobilised RSAs into the EU over multiple years. The UK and the wider G7 have committed to ensuring that Russian sovereign assets remain immobilised across our jurisdictions until Russia ceases its war of aggression and pays for the damage that it has caused to Ukraine, and G7 lenders have worked closely together to design the ERA in a way that allows for repayment in a scenario in which profits cease and Russia pays Ukraine. I hope that answers his question, but I can write to him if he wants more detail.

On NATO's spending target, there is a clear commitment from the Government to spend 2.5% of our GDP on defence, which has categorically not changed. The hon. Member will have seen in our manifesto that we will set up a path towards spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, and this will be done at a future fiscal event.

The hon. Member asked about the total value of assets and private assets. Between February 2022 and October 2023, £22.7 billion-worth of Russian assets were frozen due to UK financial sanctions regulations—a marked increase on the figure of £18.39 billion that was provided in the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation's annual report in 2021-22. OFSI is currently analysing data on immobilised assets, and on the type and value of the assets.

Like many Members, the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) asked about the involvement of the ERA in asset seizure. I have to make it clear that the G7's ERA scheme does not represent the seizure of

[Tulip Siddiq]

Russian sovereign assets in any way; it is about using the extraordinary profits that the EU has set aside to pay a series of loans to Ukraine. He and the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) asked about seizing Russian sovereign assets in the UK. Russia's obligation under international law is clear: it must pay for the damage it has caused to Ukraine. The G7 agreement to use the profits from immobilised Russian sovereign assets for the loan is an important step towards ensuring that Russia pays. Although we continue to consider all lawful avenues by which Russia is made to meet its obligation to Ukraine under international law, it is important that the UK and the G7 remain focused on delivering the ERA and the benefit that it will give to Ukraine right now, because we are very conscious of the situation in which the country finds itself.

A few other Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), asked about the proceeds from the sale of Chelsea FC. The Government are working hard to ensure that the proceeds from the sale of Chelsea reach humanitarian causes in Ukraine as quickly as possible. My hon. Friend might know that the proceeds are currently frozen in a UK bank account while a new independent foundation is established to manage and distribute the money, but this is something that we are working on and we are trying to move it along as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) asked whether this was an unlimited resource loan. The negotiations remain ongoing on the details of the loan terms, but I am focused on ensuring that there is limited impact on Ukraine's balance sheet. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) talked about the implications of the Trump victory for Ukraine. I cannot speculate on any policy decisions that the incoming Administration of President-elect Trump may make, but we have welcomed bipartisan US support for Ukraine, which has been key in the international effort. I feel that Ukraine's security is vital for global security. If there are any other questions that I have not answered, I will write to Members. I am conscious of the time and I want to finish by thanking hon. Members across the Chamber for their contributions to the debate.

**Richard Foord:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I have heard her say that at this stage the Government intend to work on the profits rather than the seized assets themselves, but will she undertake to talk to ministerial colleagues in Finland, Czechia and Estonia to find out how they have gone about seizing and using confiscated assets?

**Tulip Siddiq:** I have listened closely to what the hon. Gentleman has said, especially with regard to other countries, and I am happy to have conversations with ministerial colleagues across different countries and find out what they are doing. This is our position for now, but this is an ongoing situation and things will move. I am happy to speak to Ministers from different countries who are using assets differently.

The ERA is an innovative scheme. It will ensure that Ukraine receives vital support throughout 2025 and beyond. It will take the money generated from Russian sovereign assets and use it to support Ukraine in the

best possible way. This is further proof for us that the G7's support for Ukraine will not falter, and that the UK will stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine for as long as it takes.

I echo the comments of my hon. Friends the Members for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) and for Rushcliffe (James Naish) in thanking the people of our country for all the support that they have shown Ukraine. Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope you will indulge me for one minute while I say that my own constituents of Hampstead and Highgate have opened their doors for Ukrainian refugees, giving them their homes, community spaces and education spaces, and I particularly pay tribute to my local synagogue, South Hampstead synagogue, which is providing free English lessons for Ukrainian refugees. I was very pleased to meet those people in Parliament last week.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time.*

## FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO UKRAINE BILL (PROGRAMME)

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),*

That the following provisions shall apply to the Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill:

### *Committal*

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

*Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and on Third Reading*

(2) Proceedings in Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.

(3) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

### *Other proceedings*

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—  
(*Anna McMorris.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO UKRAINE BILL (MONEY)

*King's recommendation signified.*

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Financial Assistance to Ukraine Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any sums required by the Treasury or Secretary of State for the purpose of providing loans or other financial assistance to, or for the benefit of, the government of Ukraine as a result of—

- (a) the arrangements described as the Extraordinary Revenue Acceleration Loans for Ukraine announced on 14 June 2024 at the G7 summit in Apulia in Italy, or
- (b) any subsequent arrangements that are supplemental to or modify or replace those arrangements.—  
(*Anna McMorris.*)

*Question agreed to.*



## SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

*Ordered,*

That Marie Goldman, Leigh Ingham, Gordon McKee, Charlotte Nichols and Jesse Norman be appointed to the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority until the end of the present Parliament, in pursuance of paragraph 1(d) of Schedule 3 to the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, as amended.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

## HOUSE OF COMMONS MEMBERS' FUND

*Ordered,*

That Holly Lynch, Sir Charles Walker and Peter Grant be removed as Trustees of the House of Commons Members' Fund and Mark Tami, Chris Elmore and Dr Danny Chambers be appointed as Trustees in pursuance of section 2 of the House of Commons Members' Fund Act 2016.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

#### FINANCIAL SERVICES

That the draft Collective Investment Schemes (Temporary Recognition) and Central Counterparties (Transitional Provision) (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 15 October, be approved.—(*Anna McMorris.*)

*Question agreed to.*

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

#### FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Insurance Distribution (Regulated Activities and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 24 October, be approved.—(*Anna McMorris.*)

*Question agreed to.*

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

#### PREVENTION AND SUPPRESSION OF TERRORISM

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Alterations to the Search Powers Code for Northern Ireland) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 15 October, be approved.—(*Anna McMorris.*)

*Question agreed to.*

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

#### ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Communications Act 2003 (Disclosure of Information) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 9 September, be approved.—(*Anna McMorris.*)

*Question agreed to.*

## Healthcare: Hampshire

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

5.10 pm

**Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): Whether I am door-knocking at the general election or reading my inbox, the NHS and healthcare services are, by a long way, the single biggest worry that people talk about. After 14 years of Conservative mismanagement of both the economy and the NHS, I have heard from many people about how they are struggling to access NHS services not only for themselves but for their children, which causes huge stress for the family and friends of those involved.

In 2019, Boris Johnson announced that Hampshire would have one of 40 new hospitals. In 2024 the sitting Conservative MP I stood against repeated once again that there would be a new hospital in Hampshire. It was frustrating, although possibly not surprising, to find out after the general election that not only had there never been any money assigned to the new hospital in Hampshire but that there is a £22 billion deficit that we had not previously known about.

Hospital managers, along with the chief executives of hospital trusts and integrated care boards, are trying to plan the future of healthcare in Hampshire, which becomes difficult when the goalposts keep moving and when they do not know whether there will be a new hospital. It is also causing huge stress for the residents around Winchester, especially those south of Winchester, who have been told that they might lose their accident and emergency department and their consultant-led maternity services as part of the new hospital plan. I have heard from thousands of people, including up to 30,000 who signed a petition, about the importance of keeping our A&E and consultant-led maternity services in and around Winchester. I have heard from many people whose lives were saved at Winchester and who are worried that they might have to travel further.

There has been a public consultation on the location of a new hospital, and it is currently being reviewed. Winchester residents are very concerned that none of the suitable potential sites in Winchester was included as an option. People had to choose between north or south of Basingstoke. This is not only a concern for people in Winchester, who will have to travel further for emergency healthcare; it is also a concern for the management of Southampton hospital, who are concerned that the further north a new hospital is built, the more that people will go to Southampton because it is closer. At the moment, Southampton hospital is operating at capacity and would need significant new resources if the hospital were built too far north.

When we look at the future of healthcare in Hampshire, we should seriously consider why we would build a new hospital so close to Frimley Park, which is going to be rebuilt because it has reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and is only 20 minutes away along the A3. Why would we have two new hospitals so close to each other? I would appreciate having a meeting with Minister to discuss the potential location of any new hospital, so that we can ensure everyone in Winchester can access healthcare in an appropriate place.

[Dr Danny Chambers]

The location of any new hospital is key to the future of healthcare in Hampshire because it will provide healthcare for decades to come. However, we are aware that the proposed new hospital may not be included in the new hospital programme after the review, so we need to focus on our current hospital. The NHS staff at that hospital are fantastic, but we need to look at how we can support it now and in the decades to come.

**Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): I apologise for intervening on the hon. Gentleman without notice; I appreciate him giving way. He outlined the case for a new hospital at junction 7 of the M3, but he is slightly muddling the argument. Clinical professionals recommended a location for that hospital, with replacement services that were being taken from Winchester hospital, while maintaining a Winchester hospital with certain services. Blue light times showed that there would be no significant difference in accessing healthcare for someone living in the north half of my old constituency of Eastleigh and someone living the part of his constituency that he mentioned. The hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend, the new hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis), opposed the new hospital, so is it not a little bit awkward for him to say that the Government had no funding plans, when he opposed the location and that hospital being created? That meant there was a muddling of decision making because he and his colleague opposed that hospital being created in the first place.

**Dr Chambers:** We never opposed a new hospital—that was something the Conservatives were saying about us. We support a new hospital, we want a new hospital, and we want modern healthcare services in Hampshire. However, we were very concerned that the proposed location of the new hospital is not suitable when we look at how healthcare is delivered throughout Hampshire. Sites just north of Winchester were identified as suitable; when we look at a map of Hampshire, it is clear that those proposed locations would be much more suitable for people throughout Hampshire, including those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, to reach emergency services.

Our current A&E department, like other A&E departments, is hugely busy, especially as we head into winter. We know that many people attend A&E because they cannot get the primary care they need. Up to 20% of people who turn up at A&E are there because they cannot get a doctor's appointment. People who are in a mental health crisis—many are often already on a waiting list—are going to A&E. They take up a huge amount of time and staff resources, often needing 15 to 18 hours of constant monitoring before they can be taken to a place of safety. We also have people turning up with dental issues because they cannot access an NHS dentist.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. While there are other hon. Members in the Chamber know the issues well, does he agree that the ability to bring healthcare into communities is vital, particularly for people in isolated communities who cannot hop on a bus every 15 or 20 minutes, or even every hour, to get to their appointments? Some areas simply cannot have centralised care or a new hospital; they do need localised facilities. If the hon. Gentleman is asking for that, then he is asking for the right thing.

**Dr Chambers:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. As a vet who has worked in public health programmes around the world, I know that it has been proven time and again that it is always more cost effective to treat people in their communities and keep them healthy, than to treat them in hospital when they get sick. We need to focus on that. I know the Government have said that they want to move treatment from hospitals into the community.

**Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I suspect the hon. Member understands that I probably will not agree with him on the thrust of his argument about Basingstoke hospital. However, on the point about local community services, in my seat, in Whitehill and Bordon, there is a debate about whether we should keep the old Chase community hospital or build a new health hub. There are arguments on both sides, but the one thing that unites the two is the lack of communication from the Hampshire and Isle of Wight integrated care board. Does the hon. Gentleman find it as frustrating as I do that that ICB seems to not want to communicate with residents across the county?

**Dr Chambers:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman; when there is a lack of communication with residents, decision makers and any other interested stakeholders, that is when there are difficulties, such as rumours and unnecessary anxiety. Improved communication, whether in healthcare or in any Government Department, solves a huge number of problems.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about accessing healthcare when people live in rural areas, I have a story about Margaret, who lives just south of Winchester and who wrote to me saying that she had been given an appointment at Basingstoke for a particular type of X-ray. Her journey to Basingstoke hospital took well over an hour and involved multiple buses and a train, plus considerable walking time. Margaret has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and gets exhausted walking long distances, and she cannot easily afford a taxi all the way from Basingstoke back to Winchester. She asked me whether people without cars were to become second-class citizens and be denied access to decent healthcare options. We have to look at individuals' situations, and that can include needing really good public transport. The more community care we have in people's towns and villages, the quicker they can get there from their homes.

The other side of emergency care and A&E departments is social care. We have said many times that we cannot fix the NHS without fixing social care. We know that in the Hampshire hospitals NHS foundation trust, there are between 160 and 200 people at any given point who are well enough to be discharged and more appropriately cared for in the community with social care packages, but who are currently stuck in a hospital bed and cannot be discharged. That means that patients cannot be moved out of A&E and people cannot be removed from ambulances as quickly as they could be, which means that ambulance waiting times are longer.

When I spoke to the CEO of Winchester hospital, he said that the single biggest help they could get from Government would be another 160 social care packages. Although people ask where the money will come from, we know it is more expensive to keep someone in a hospital bed than to give them a social care package.

We have winter pressures coming up—indeed, winter has already started—and the CEO has told me on more than one occasion that, to help with those winter pressures, more social care packages would probably be the single biggest intervention that would make a huge difference. Local authorities struggle to afford social care packages and the NHS trusts have to fund some of those packages out of their NHS budget, which is primarily meant for treating people in hospital.

One of the biggest concerns raised by Winchester residents is the potential removal of consultant-led maternity services at Winchester hospital. That means that if a woman were to haemorrhage or require an emergency C-section during labour, she would need to be transferred. To put that into perspective, in April 2024, 22.7% of births were performed via emergency C-section at Winchester hospital. It is clear that surgical interventions are not an unusual eventuality, but something that will affect more than one in five mothers.

An emergency transfer in such a situation would inevitably put the lives of some women and babies at serious risk and, tragically, some could be lost. A constituent wrote to me about her daughter, who had recently haemorrhaged badly after giving birth to a baby who was in a breech position. The blood transfusion and lifesaving surgery to remove her placenta needed to happen within minutes, and it is unthinkable what would have happened had there been no consultants on hand. As someone who has performed many emergency caesareans—on animals rather than on humans—I know that time is of the essence, and anything that delays surgical intervention can make a huge difference, not just to whether the person and the baby survive but to whether the baby has potential brain damage and other life-changing complications.

As the Liberal Democrat mental health spokesperson, I see this debate as a chance to highlight how desperately we need more resources put into mental health, alongside a more holistic approach to treatment. When speaking to residents in Winchester, one of the most common concerns is the difficulty in accessing mental healthcare, and that is especially true for parents who are struggling to access mental healthcare for their children.

I spoke to a constituent near Swanmore who was struggling to access the mental healthcare and support they needed for their child who was anorexic and had an eating disorder. They had been informed that their child had to reach a lower BMI to qualify for the threshold to get treatment, because resources are so stretched. That would not be considered even remotely acceptable for any other disease. A person with cancer would never be told that they needed to reach stage 4 before they qualified for treatment. We know that outcomes with delayed treatment for mental and physical health disorders, of which eating disorders are a combination of both, will be much less successful and much less cost-effective, requiring longer and less successful treatment the longer that the condition is left. I urge the Minister to look with particular concern at the mental health of young people and children. Delays in mental health treatment for anyone can be catastrophic, but a three-year delay for someone who is only 13, 14, or 15 is a huge chunk of their life.

As part of that, we urgently need to invest in primary care. Failing to address this will only place greater pressure on our already overstretched hospitals. I have

spoken to people who have spent extended amounts of time in hospital beds, because they cannot get the mental healthcare that they need.

Similarly, the lack of NHS dentists often forces patients to turn up to hospital, sometimes needing a general anaesthetic, to sort out tooth root abscesses, which costs more than providing NHS dental care. It seems as though all the dentists I speak to say that their current contract for performing NHS care is not fit for purpose. I urge the Minister to look at this as an urgent priority, because so many people are not receiving the dental care that they need. It seems as though this whole issue will not be resolved until the NHS contract is looked at.

The other issue that affects people getting healthcare in their communities, especially around Hampshire, Winchester and the Meon Valley, relates to struggling pharmacies. The situation for pharmacies seems to be very similar to that of the dentists in that their arrangement with the Government for providing prescription services does not seem to be fit for purpose. It seems to be costing pharmacies money to provide prescription drugs, and they are telling me that their businesses are no longer viable. The more pharmacies that we lose, the further people will have to travel to not only collect drugs, but get medical advice and vaccines.

In conclusion, I wish to pay tribute to NHS staff. I imagine that they dread the winter coming up. Every year, it is a stress for them. Every year, they are overworked. And every year, we know that both clinical and non-clinical staff will work longer hours than they are contracted to do. I know that they will be bracing themselves right now. They will be busier, and they will be putting themselves at risk from getting things such as flu, covid and the other respiratory diseases that we see in the winter. One thing that we can all do, both as the public and the Government, is to encourage everyone to get vaccinated ahead of these winter pressures. Anything we can do to prevent a trip to hospital will make their job easier and make it less likely that they will get sick.

**Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con):** The hon. Gentleman speaks eloquently on a wide range of healthcare challenges in Hampshire. Does he agree that our shared integrated care board for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight must do all that it can to make the best of the situation, particularly in relation to NHS dentistry and funding for hospices across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight?

**Dr Chambers:** The hon. Member makes a good point about hospices in particular. Only about a third of hospice funding is provided by the Government. It is a hugely emotive subject, which affects not only the people in the hospice but the whole family, who are trying to care for a loved one who often has only weeks or months left to go. We have two hospices in Winchester, one of which is a children's hospice, Naomi House. Some of the most moving visits I have ever done have been to hospices, where the staff and patients are incredibly brave. We have a debate coming up on assisted dying. We will really have to look at palliative and hospice care and how it is funded, and how we make it sustainable and fit for purpose. I thank him for that important intervention.

Many constituents write to tell me about the excellent care that they receive in hospitals, and how much they appreciate the hard work of NHS staff. A Winchester



[Dr Chambers]

resident called Owen wrote to tell me that he honestly does not believe that he would be alive today were it not for Winchester hospital. Owen sadly suffers from a brain tumour in the pituitary gland, and has needed many emergency treatments. Owen lives five minutes from the hospital and has managed to have lifesaving treatment there on multiple occasions.

We need to avoid the trap of cutting short-term costs, such as by not investing in social care, which has ended up costing the state so much more money in the long run. We need a comprehensive plan to give people adequate local healthcare throughout their lives, and escape the endless cycle of crisis after crisis. We know that winter is coming this year, and coming next year. What are we doing to ensure that we will not have an NHS crisis in Hampshire next winter as well?

5.32 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) on securing the debate, and echo his thanks to all health and social care staff who do incredible work in very difficult circumstances. We know that our NHS is broken. Whenever MPs from across the House come to me with issues affecting their constituencies, I repeat the same mantra: this Government will be honest about the issues facing our NHS, and serious about tackling them. Lord Darzi has already completed his review of the current state of the NHS, and his report laid bare the true scale of the challenges facing our health service.

We will not sugarcoat the problems faced by the health service in each and every part of the country, because colleagues from across the House are right to raise issues with me, and we will fix them together. We have already launched our national conversation on the future of the NHS, and we want patients, families and staff to join that conversation and make their voices heard. If Members have not already been to the website, the address is [change.nhs.uk](https://change.nhs.uk). Please let us have some sensible suggestions—not firing the Secretary of State out of a cannon.

In her spring Budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an extra £22.6 billion to protect NHS day-to-day spending. Every penny of that investment will come alongside vital health reforms; they are two sides of the same coin.

As the Secretary of State outlined last week, this Government intend to publish a league table of providers, allocating the best talent to the most challenging areas and ensuring that there are no rewards for failure. Where necessary, we will remove failing managers, and we will reward senior leaders who successfully improve performance.

**Paul Holmes:** On failing organisations, just before the general election a cross-party group of MPs, including Labour MPs, had a meeting with the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), about the performance and management of Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB. Members of Parliament from across the political divide have serious concerns about its leadership, communications and funding—not Government funding, and I welcome

the increased funding, but the way that it is distributed to services in Hampshire. Frankly, I do not think the leadership is up to running that ICB. Will the Minister agree to meet me and other Members from across the House to discuss the urgency of the situation? Will he find out from his civil servants where the request for a two-week action plan went and come back to Hampshire MPs?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am sure the officials in the Box will have noted the concerns the hon. Gentleman rightly raised about his ICB. I will ensure that that is communicated back to the Minister for Secondary Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), so she can look in more detail at those concerns and communicate with the Hampshire MPs. If a meeting is necessary at the end of that, I am sure she will be more than willing to meet him and his colleagues.

We want to ensure that every part of our NHS is working as well as it can and, as I say, good performance will be rewarded as part of our reforms. Alongside a college of executive and clinical leadership, that will ensure the NHS continues to develop and attract the best talent to top positions, bringing the best outcomes for patients and taxpayers alike.

Let me turn to some of the specific issues that the hon. Member for Winchester raised. On local hospital provision, patients deserve to have safe, compassionate and personalised care in a fit-for-purpose environment. That is why this Government have committed to building and refurbishing hospitals across the country. The new hospital programme includes a new hospital for north and mid Hampshire and a major refurbishment at Winchester to provide specialist and emergency care. As part of the proposal, I am aware that the local trust explored changes to the current obstetrician-led maternity services at the Winchester site. I know the hon. Member has been a strong champion of that, having raised it with the Prime Minister in October.

As announced in the Chancellor's autumn Budget, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will set out further details of the review of the new hospital programme in the coming months, alongside a new and realistic schedule for delivery. The Hampshire hospitals scheme is in scope of the review, and I acknowledge the local concern over the proposal and the impact on the Winchester site and on maternity services.

**Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con):** My constituents use both Winchester hospital and Basingstoke hospital, as well as others, such as Frimley Park, the Queen Alexandra and Guildford. I understand that a clinical assessment was made about urgent treatment and services at Winchester, but there is a need for a new hospital in or near Basingstoke. In what the Minister said about a review of the new hospital programme, I accept he says a statement is coming soon, but will he confirm that it is about timing and that he or a colleague will come forward to the House soon with the certainty that people in Hampshire need?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Absolutely. I will try to be as unpartisan as I can, but the hospital programme that we inherited from the right hon. Member's Government did not have anything like the money it needed to back it up. Conservative Members can shake their heads, but it is true. It had

nothing like the money needed to bring forward those hospitals. As I have said, we will review that. Our intention is to bring forward those schemes, but that has to be done in an achievable programme, with the finances to back it up. When we announce to the House how we will schedule the hospital programme, I expect that all the answers he wants will be there. We intend to introduce the hospital building programme, but it must be done with money—we cannot build them with fresh air.

**Dr Chambers:** any potential new hospital is decades away, while the hospital we have needs to be maintained and improved. The quickest way forward is to provide 160 new social care packages for Winchester hospital. Will the Minister meet me and the chief executive officer of Winchester hospital to work out how we can deliver those packages as quickly as possible, and provide good A&E, hospital and social care services for everyone in and around Winchester?

**Andrew Gwynne:** It is crucial that we have the best possible health and care services in place for today's needs while we plan for the future. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns, and I will ensure that they are communicated back to the Minister for Secondary Care, so that she can consider them. I will ask her to report back to him on that. Ultimately, all decisions are best made locally, so that they can cater to local interests, and are clinically led. This is no exception. I know that the hon. Gentleman's trust will consider all feedback from the public consultation held earlier this year, including from those who will access the new facilities, as well as wider bodies of evidence. The result of the public consultation on location and services will be put to the local integrated care board, and we look forward to hearing the outcome of that.

**Dr Chambers:** I apologise for intervening again so soon. One of my main concerns about the public consultation is that the NHS had assessed sites in Winchester as suitable, but they were not then included in the consultation. The people of Winchester want to know why those suitable sites were not included in the consultation. Can the Minister assure me that that will be addressed by the ICB, and anyone else publishing the consultation?

**Andrew Gwynne:** As I said before the hon. Gentleman's intervention, ultimately these are local decisions, and they must be clinically led. If the trust has decided that certain outcomes that he would like to see are out of scope of the consultation, we must take it as read that there are sound clinical reasons for that. If he thinks otherwise, I am sure that he can bring that up with my hon. Friend the Minister for Secondary Care, but ultimately we must be guided by the clinicians. They know, more than we Ministers in Whitehall will ever know, what the better outcomes for their areas are.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned primary and community care. We know that patients nationally and in Hampshire find it increasingly difficult to see a GP. We are committed as a Government to fixing the front door to the NHS, to ensure that patients receive the care that they deserve. If patients cannot get a GP appointment, they end up at accident and emergency, which is worse for them and more expensive for the taxpayer. That is why we will shift the focus of the NHS out of hospitals and into community. One of our three big shifts is from hospital

to community; the others are from analogue to digital, and from sickness to prevention. Those three things, taken as a whole, could be quite transformative in how we deliver primary care.

**Gregory Stafford:** I agree entirely with the Minister on the shift from hospital to community. I do not want to labour the point that I made when I intervened on the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), but in the Hampshire part of my seat, we have a debate about whether we will still have Chase community hospital or a new health hub there. They are both essentially local services. The ICB is dragging its feet and will not make a decision on which it will be. Local people do not know what will happen, and decisions are being kicked down the road by the ICB. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) said, the leadership of the Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB is not fit for purpose. Will the Minister meet us and them to ensure that we can get this moving?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I hear loud and clear what Conservative Members say about the leadership of their ICB. I hope that the ICB management will obtain a copy of today's *Hansard* and read not only those comments, but the Minister's reply. I expect them to make decisions in a timely fashion, so that there is some certainty for the local population about the new make-up of health and care services in that area—not just for the sake of patients and the local population, but staff. As we redesign services and change towards more preventive, community-focused care, some parts may become obsolete, and it is absolutely crucial that we take the workforce, as well as the population, on that journey of change in services. I very much hope that the hon. Gentleman's ICB leadership will have heard the message from the Minister at the Dispatch Box, which is that they really need to crack on, make a decision, communicate it and work with Members of Parliament, the public and staff on whichever changes they propose.

I return to primary and community care. As I said, our manifesto commits to moving towards a neighbourhood health service, with more care delivered in local communities, so that problems are spotted earlier. We will bring back the family doctor by incentivising GPs to see the same patient, so that ongoing or complex conditions are dealt with effectively. In doing so, we will improve continuity of care, which is associated with better health outcomes for patients, and our plan will guarantee a face-to-face appointment for all those who want one; we will deliver a modern booking system that will end the 8 am scramble. That is crucial in improving access to general practice.

The hon. Member for Winchester rightly raised the huge problems with dentistry in his area, which are not that uncommon across the whole country. I do not believe that the previous Government's dentistry recovery plan went far enough; too many people were still struggling to find an NHS appointment. We are working to ensure that patients can start to access additional urgent dental appointments as soon as possible, and we will target the areas that need the most—the so-called dental deserts. Integrated care boards have started to advertise posts through the golden hello scheme. This recruitment incentive will see up to 240 dentists receive payments of £20,000 to work in the areas that need them most for three years. The common reason why children aged five to nine are

[Andrew Gwynne]

admitted to hospital—this is absolutely shocking in the year 2024—is tooth decay. We will work with local authorities to introduce supervised toothbrushing for three to five-year-olds in the most deprived communities. These programmes are proven to reduce tooth decay and boost good practice at home.

To rebuild dentistry in the long term, we will reform the dental contract with the sector, with a shift to focusing on prevention and the retention of NHS dentists. To be fair, this has been an issue for all Governments, going back to the Labour Government who introduced the dental contract. They did so for the right reasons, but in 2010, we recognised that the dental contract was not working in the way we envisaged, and that it had to change. It is shocking that 14 years have passed since then with no real action having been taken—we are determined to fix that. At the same time, we will not wait to make improvements to the system to increase access and incentivise the workforce to deliver more NHS care. We are continuing to meet the British Dental Association and other representatives of the dental sector to discuss how we can best deliver our shared ambition of improving access for NHS dental patients.

I have to say that the statistics for Hampshire and Isle of Wight integrated care board make sorry reading. Only 36% of adults were seen by an NHS dentist in the 24 months to June 2024, compared with 40.3% across England, and 54% of children were seen by an NHS dentist in the 12 months to June 2024, compared with 56% across England. In 2023-24, there were 46 dentists for every 100,000 people in the hon. Gentleman's trust, whereas the national average across all ICBs in the same year was just under 50 dentists, and in 2024, the general practice patient survey success rate for getting an NHS dental appointment in the past two years in the Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB area was 72%, compared with 76% nationally. They are not great statistics nationwide, but they are certainly not brilliant in the ICB of hon. Members present, and we look for real improvements there.

Turning to the pharmacy sector, we want to take pressure off GPs by increasing the services offered in community pharmacies. There is so much more that our pharmacists could and should be doing to deliver basic healthcare services on the high street and in the community, as part of the shift from hospital to community. That would free up thousands of GP appointments in cases where people do not really need to see a general practitioner for their condition. We are committed to looking at how we can further expand the role of pharmacies and better use the clinical skills of pharmacists as more become independent prescribers—that is where the potential gets really exciting. Now that the budget for Government has been set, we will resume our consultation with Community Pharmacy England shortly. I hope Members will understand that I am unable to say more until that consultation has concluded. Suffice it to say that Pharmacy First and community pharmacies have a huge role to play in improving health outcomes in the community.

**Jim Shannon:** In my former role as an Assembly Member back home, we had a very close relationship with pharmacies. The consultation process that the Minister is outlining for England would be very much

welcomed in Northern Ireland, so can I ask the Minister a favour? When that consultation concludes, will he share his findings with the Northern Ireland Assembly, and particularly with the Minister in Northern Ireland? What the Minister is hoping to achieve is what we would also like to achieve.

**Andrew Gwynne:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. No part of the United Kingdom holds a monopoly on wisdom, and if we are doing something good or if there is innovation in one part of the United Kingdom, it is incumbent on Health Ministers across the devolved Administrations and here in Whitehall to share best practice—to work together and, where possible, take a four-nation approach. I hope I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that since this new Labour Government came into power, we have really tried to reset our relationships with the devolved Administrations and with the various Ministers. I have had several meetings with Mike Nesbitt on a range of health issues that appertain to the whole United Kingdom on which we want to ensure there is consistency of approach. I am more than happy to communicate further with Mike Nesbitt and colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive on how we reform our health and social care services in England to see whether things can be taken by them in Northern Ireland. Vice versa, if there are good ideas from Northern Ireland, I am more than happy to consider them in how we transform NHS services in England.

The hon. Member for Winchester mentioned social care, and he is right to raise winter resilience. I have spoken about fixing the front door to the NHS through primary care reforms. We also have a serious job to do to fix the back door and ensure that patient flows through the system are not held up because of a lack of social care. On winter resilience, I hope he will understand that we are working to ensure that there are no crises and that we tackle the issues of social care. Getting beds in appropriate places is a key part of our plan.

In the long term, there are no quick fixes. The Dilnot reforms were announced by the previous Government, but it is fair to say that, when we came into office, we found that the money apparently set aside for the Dilnot reforms had already been spent on other NHS pressures. Laudable though it may have been to spend that money to try to get waiting times and waiting lists down and to fix some of the problems that that Government had created, it left us with a bit of a social care issue, given that the reform money had gone, had disappeared and was no longer there to be spent.

Over the next decade, this Government are committed to building consensus on the long-term reform needed to create a national care service based on consistent national standards, including engaging across the parties. It is good to see the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), in his place, and I am sure he will be very willing to work with us, as indeed will the Liberal Democrats. We genuinely want to make sure that we get cross-party consensus on the future of our adult social care, so that we can finally grasp this nettle once and for all, and to fix it without it becoming such a contentious issue, as it became, sadly, in 2010 and 2017. Neither of the two main parties has a good story to tell on this, because we have both shamefully used it as a political football from



time to time. It is now appropriate that we set aside those politics and get on with fixing social care. I hope that, in due course, we will be able to move forward on that agenda.

I assure the hon. Member for Winchester that we are acutely aware of the problems with mental health services. We both agree that waiting lists are unacceptably high. Indeed, the people of Hampshire and most of England are not getting the mental health care they deserve. He has spoken previously about Lord Darzi's report, which has shone a searing spotlight on the waiting lists that young people face, in particular. I am immensely proud that this Government are intent on tackling the issue head on, with specialist mental health professionals in every school in England. That is our aim. These NHS-funded mental health support teams in schools and colleges will work with young people and parents to manage mental health difficulties and to develop a whole-school approach to positive mental health and wellbeing.

**Damian Hinds:** Can I just check whether I heard the Minister correctly? Did he say there would be a mental health specialist in every school in England?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Yes, that is our manifesto commitment. There will be mental health specialists for every school in England. In Hampshire, there are mental health support teams assigned across the area, including schools in Winchester, Eastleigh, Andover and Havant. In addition, we will introduce young futures hubs in every community and recruit an additional 8,500 mental health workers across children and adult services. We have also set aside £26 million in capital investment for new mental health crisis centres, and we are expanding NHS talking therapies, alongside individual placement and support schemes.

This Government are committed to fixing the NHS so that patients, including those in Hampshire, can access excellent care when they need it. It is true to say that every Labour Government have inherited an NHS in a far poorer state than that which they bequeathed to their successors. It turns to this Labour Government to fix our NHS once more.

*Question put and agreed to.*

6 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

Wednesday 20 November 2024

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

## Blind and Partially Sighted People: Employment Support

9.30 am

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered employment support for blind and partially sighted people.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I am really pleased to have secured this debate on what I and others—judging by the number of Members here today—believe is an incredibly important issue. I thank the many organisations that provided briefings ahead of the debate.

In October, the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment, which I chair, published its “Changing Attitudes, Changing Lives” report, which looked at employer attitudes towards blind and partially sighted people. I thank the secretariat—the Royal National Institute of Blind People and the Thomas Pocklington Trust—all those who responded to the written consultation, and especially those who shared their experiences at the oral evidence sessions, which I will discuss shortly.

We wanted to know why the number of blind and partially sighted people in employment is still stubbornly low at a time when there are about 900,000 job vacancies, despite the Equality Act 2010, a wealth of diversity and inclusion policies, and more than a decade of welfare-to-work programmes from various Governments. In November 2023, the APPG commissioned YouGov to carry out polling to look at employer attitudes. The findings were shocking, and prompted the APPG to launch its inquiry to look at the issue in more detail. To my knowledge, it is the first parliamentary inquiry to look solely at employer attitudes. We held a series of oral evidence sessions, put out a call for written evidence and held a number of one-to-one meetings with employers, including Apple and Channel 4. We heard from a range of employers, sight loss organisations and, most importantly, blind and partially sighted people themselves.

We found that 48% of employers said that they did not have accessible recruitment processes, so for many the online job application was not accessible, and in many cases it was not compatible with assistive technology. That obviously prevented many people living with sight loss from applying for those jobs in the first place. Some employers were not willing to make reasonable adjustments where possible, for example for psychometric testing, which is part of the recruitment process for many grad schemes, so many of those platforms were also inaccessible. Most worryingly, about a quarter of employers said that they would not be willing to make workplace adjustments or adaptations in order to employ blind and partially sighted people. The problem stems partly from a lack of awareness of where to access support or funding, or just advice and information, but there is also a pattern of outdated attitudes towards visually impaired people.

During the oral evidence sessions, we heard powerful testimony from many blind and partially sighted people. Many expressed a deep sense of frustration and anger at the job market because employers do not understand the importance of ensuring that their recruitment and interview processes are inclusive. Websites were not accessible, and application forms were not provided in alternative formats. Many respondents had to face the dilemma of whether to disclose their disability, or even ask for reasonable adjustments during the interview process.

I know that from my own experience. I have always been in the camp that chooses to declare their visual impairment at the start, but not everybody has the confidence to do that, based on their experiences. Others referred to the time it took to complete applications and said that their request for a reasonable adjustment of extra time had not been granted. One respondent reported that an interviewer seemed more focused on their blindness than their qualifications; they said that it felt as though the assessment of their ability to do the job was treated as a secondary factor, rather than the primary objective.

Although I am speaking a lot about the recruitment process—applications and interviews—many respondents shared their frustrations about being in work and acquiring their sight loss, or being in work and wanting additional aids or adaptations. I hope hon. Members do not mind my speaking from my own lived experience. Throughout my working life—I will not show my age by saying how long that has been—I have known the challenges that many have faced. I have been a Member of Parliament for seven and a half years, and to this day I still face challenges with technology, which cause a lot of stress and worry. There are days when I am not able to do my work as an MP because my IT kit is not working. Recently, I had to go further and lodge a formal complaint. I hope that by doing that I will finally be able to get all the kit I need to do my job and represent my constituents, just as my colleagues can.

Why do we need action and change? The employment rate for people living with sight loss is 42%, compared with 82% for non-disabled people. The disability pay gap is around 17%, which equates to us working unpaid for 54 days a year. The disability employment gap has remained at around 29% to 30% for more than a decade. I think that is hugely disrespectful. Actually, it is a disgrace. Employers are missing out on a wealth of talent. One of the respondents at our oral evidence session, who is quite senior in their workplace, said that they found that their visual impairment became less of a barrier the more senior they became. That is absolutely the right thing, but it should start at the entry level of any job.

We know that not getting the right support has a negative impact on health and wellbeing. There is clear evidence that good work improves health outcomes across people’s lives and protects them against social exclusion. Employment can bring not just better incomes but financial stability, security and a greater sense of purpose, which in turn can lead to healthier diets, increased exercise, higher living standards and, most importantly, better mental health outcomes.

Our report contains some excellent examples of best practice, and I will share a few. Roger told us that in his corporate workplace, screen-reader software and ergonomic equipment enabled him to perform his tasks efficiently,



[Marsha De Cordova]

and that having a supportive team who understood his needs made him feel valued and included in his workplace. Another person told us that about a member of an interview panel who guided a visually impaired person through the process, taking them to the interview room and explaining its layout; then, as they sat down, the panel described themselves and gave information about who they were. Those are examples of small adjustments that can be made. They are not complicated or costly. As one respondent put it,

“It’s not just about providing the tools; it’s about creating a supportive environment where blind and partially sighted employees can thrive.”

Our “Changing Attitudes, Changing Lives” report makes a series of recommendations that aim to fix what we believe is a broken system. The key element is the need for a disability employment strategy that sets out measures to improve employer attitudes and increase the number of blind and partially sighted people finding and retaining work. Does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree that we need a clear strategy, and that this must be a watershed moment in how we improve employment opportunities and support?

Another recommendation is for the Government to partner with sight loss organisations to develop best practice on recruiting blind and partially sighted people and supporting them to enter work, as well as on supporting them in work. I hope that the Minister will agree to look at how he can do that. Other recommendations include reviewing the Equality Act to ensure that it is fit for the 21st century and our modern labour market. This is not just about the Government taking action; it is about employers taking action. We want them to take practical steps to ensure that their workplaces are inclusive, including by preparing documents and information in accessible formats. Naturally, we need to address the issues in the Government’s Access to Work scheme, including the delays and backlogs. When Access to Work is working efficiently, it is probably the best form of employment support.

I hope that the Minister will look carefully at the recommendations in the report, which I know he has had sight of. I welcome the fresh approach from the Government, who are taking a serious look at this issue, and thank the Minister for agreeing to meet me later today—it is interesting that the debate came on the same day. I also thank my hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, who gave a speech at the report launch. She said that it was an opportunity for “big change”, which was

“needed so that all blind and partially sighted people can play their full role in society”.

She kindly said that the report would be considered as an early submission to the upcoming employment White Paper, so I look forward to seeing what the White Paper includes in relation to a disability employment strategy.

Does the Minister agree that this issue is not just about the Department for Work and Pensions? We need a cross-Government approach that incorporates the Department for Business and Trade, the equalities office and others to ensure that we have a strategy that helps to shift employer attitudes. Will he commit to working with the Department for Business and Trade to ensure

that we take an approach that truly supports employers to snap up all the amazing talent that is waiting for them and that they are currently missing out on?

The report recommends looking at practical steps to ensure that workplaces are inclusive. However, there is already brilliant guidance and best practice available, so in many cases this is not about reinventing the wheel, but about working collaboratively with other organisations. At the moment, we subscribe to accessibility standards for online spaces. I am keen to know whether the Government will look at legislating to ensure that all websites meet an accessibility standard requirement.

Finally—I raised this issue previously—will the Government look again at the Sense charity’s recommendation for a jobcentre technology fund? Such a fund would equip jobcentres with specialist assistive technology, such as screen-reading software, so that some disabled people are able to look for work in jobcentres. At the moment, no computers in jobcentres have specialist assistive technology. The recommendation seems like a nice, quick fix that could ensure that those spaces are inclusive for people who are looking for work.

I look forward to working with the Minister and his colleagues in implementing the recommendations and ensuring that Labour will deliver for all disabled people. At the end of the day, ensuring that recruitment practices are accessible and workplaces are supportive is not about charity; it is about doing what is right and just. It is also about helping employers and our economy to benefit from the skills and talent they are missing out on.

I will end by quoting an individual who appeared before the APPG. They said:

“The more blind and partially sighted people there are in the workforce, the more public assumptions and attitudes will be challenged. This will benefit blind and partially sighted people of all ages, and ultimately change...attitudes, which is the biggest barrier to thriving for all.”

**Several hon. Members** rose—

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Order. I remind Members to bob if they wish to speak. Then we will work out the order of who is going when.

9.45 am

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq; I always look forward to it. I commend the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for setting the scene so very well on a subject that is of great interest to all hon. Members present and to me personally. It is only fair to put on the record my thanks for her leadership of the APPG on eye health and visual impairment. In the time we have known each other, I have always supported her in these debates; she used to be on the Opposition side of the Chamber, but has now been elevated. We look forward to working strongly alongside her and others in the years ahead, if God spares us.

There are currently 57,500 people across Northern Ireland with sight loss, and the figure is expected to rise by over 25% by 2032. Today’s debate sets out the problem, but it also gives us an opportunity to think about what we can do to reduce that figure. Some 50% of sight loss is preventable, and it is that preventable 50% that I want to talk about.

The message must be clear that eye tests are as necessary as any other health check. I work very closely alongside the opticians in Newtownards in my constituency: they come to me regularly with their ideas, and I always convey those ideas to the Health Minister in Northern Ireland and to the Secretary of State or Minister at Westminster. I cannot remember the technical term for it, but the opticians in Newtownards have the most up-to-date machinery for checking people's eyes—it is phenomenal.

My question to the Minister, if he does not mind my asking it at the very beginning, is what has been done to ensure more opticians' tests, even for people who may think that they do not need one. I do not want to make them mandatory, because that would be wrong, but they should be made more accessible and available.

I will give two examples of the importance of opticians' tests. A gentleman I know quite well once came to see me. I said that he did not look very well—he was very pale—and he said, "Jim, I have an absolutely splitting headache." I said, "Have you been to the doctor?" He said, "I have, and the doctor gave me some headache tablets." I said, "Where are you going now?" He said, "I'm going to the opticians." I said, "You go to the optician and tell him about your headache." The optician took that man's details and sent him directly from Newtownards up to Ulster hospital in Dundonald. He had a tumour the size of an apple in his head. Immediate surgery saved that man's life.

Another person I know quite well had been having headaches and blurred vision for some time. She would come to see me about benefits, and I would say, "Look, I think you should go and see your optician." She did, and fortunately she had a tumour removed. It saved her sight and saved her life.

What more can we do? We—when I say "we", I mean the Government—can prevent eye loss. If the Government can get people to make appointments early, I believe we can see great things happening for the 50% of sight loss that is preventable. Back in June, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland launched two new guides to support adults with sensory disabilities in Northern Ireland. As always, I will give some examples that I hope are helpful for the Minister to take on board.

The new resources, known as care pathways, map out the care and treatment that users can expect from professionals and support organisations to help them to manage their conditions. I welcome the excellent initiative to make a pathway to care and a future free from red tape and obstructions. My goodness! I know that there is red tape to get through—we understand that—but sometimes it becomes so burdensome that people just turn off.

The guides were released in tandem with the Royal National Institute of Blind People and other charitable groups. The support provided for blind and partially sighted people by those in the charitable sector is phenomenal. They should be thanked for stepping up and filling the breach, as they so often do.

I read recently on the RNIB's website that it has a scheme called "SkillSET RNIB (2023)", a Northern Ireland-based pre-employment initiative that offers opportunities for people who are seeking to gain employment for the first time or who are unable to continue in their current job because of sight loss.

The hon. Member for Battersea has described the problems she experiences in coming to work and how technology lets her down; schemes such as these, in tandem with the Government Department back home and with the RNIB, can come up with ideas to address those issues directly and helpfully. They can enable people to find work and can encourage them in everyday life.

I am also aware that the Department for Work and Pensions has the Access to Work scheme, which is operated through the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland. Access to Work can contribute towards any supplementary employment costs that result from a disability. Sometimes we come and present cases, but there are things that Governments do, both back home at the Northern Ireland Assembly and here. I believe that the DWP's Access to Work scheme is available for any paid job, part-time or full-time, permanent or temporary.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend talks about what needs to be done on pathways to work. Does he agree that potential employers need to understand two things? First, they could be in breach of the law if they engage in activities that prevent partially sighted or blind people from getting employment. Secondly, they could be overlooking better-qualified candidates for employment. Either way, they will lose unless they take account of this very worthwhile debate and of the need to ensure that they comply.

**Jim Shannon:** As always, my hon. Friend adds important evidence that takes the debate forward, and I thank him for it. Hopefully the Minister is listening as well.

**Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): The hon. Member has rightly mentioned the importance of Access to Work and how it can make a real difference in supporting disabled people, including blind and partially sighted people, to secure and retain employment. One of the challenges is ensuring that there is enough provision and that enough employers are aware of Access to Work. Does the hon. Member agree that it is important to ensure greater awareness of Access to Work and more opportunities for that support?

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I know that the Minister is an assiduous Minister who is here to help, and that the staff and civil servants behind him are taking notes on all these matters, so hopefully when he winds up the debate he will satisfy our requests. I also welcome the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger), to his place; I wish him well in the role and look forward to his contribution.

The Access to Work scheme has no minimum number of hours for eligibility for support, although people are generally expected to reach the lower earnings limit. Access to Work aims to help if someone needs support or adaptations beyond the reasonable adjustments; it helps pay towards them. What we have in place is excellent, but as the hon. Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker) says, people need to know what is available. The scheme is a great one, but the onus is firmly on the employers' shoulders. That is where we are failing. There needs to be a pathway for our young people throughout schooling and into employment. We need to tell people who have not worked before,

[Jim Shannon]

“It is not impossible. It can be done. It is within your reach to use your talents, intelligence and abilities and work as your peers do.”

Debates like this one raise awareness, which is wonderful, but we need to ensure that any person who has a diagnosis of sight loss understands that they are not alone or expected to sit at home. They are part of this community, and there is a space for them and a role for them to play. The charities seek to hammer home that message and they do absolutely marvellous work, but we all need to do more. My hope is that this new Government will achieve that. I have known the Minister for years and he has always shown sympathy and compassion, so I know that he will be able to respond in a positive fashion and help people to do better. We have that opportunity, and the Government have that opportunity. Let's do it.

9.55 am

**Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) not only on securing this debate on such an important topic, but on her skill and commitment in leading the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment.

The APPG is such an important group for ensuring that the voices of blind and partially sighted people are heard in this Parliament. Having been for many years a member of the cross-party group on visual impairment in the Scottish Parliament, I am delighted to find that the APPG here is also an effective forum for advancing key policy areas for people with visual impairment. Changing employers' attitudes and increasing employment opportunities for blind and partially sighted people is vital, for all the reasons that my hon. Friend set out in her excellent opening speech and that the hugely important “Changing Attitudes, Changing Lives” report highlights.

As an MP for a Scottish constituency, I am keenly aware that this is as important an issue for people with visual impairment in Scotland as it is in the rest of the UK. In his excellent speech, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was quite right to point out that there is also important work for the devolved Administrations to do. Only one in four blind and partially sighted people in Scotland is in paid employment. Research by RNIB Scotland shows that there are about 9,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in Scotland, of whom only about 2,000 are in work. As many as 78% are not employed, so for blind and partially sighted people in Scotland the disability employment gap is particularly acute.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea rightly highlighted the disability pay gap and the inequality that it creates in our society. There is a huge opportunity cost not only to people with visual impairment who want to work and cannot find work, but to our society as a whole. In my career before my election to this place, I was fortunate to work at the charity Sight Scotland. A number of our services employed blind and partially sighted people. They were valued members of our team, not only as experts by experience but because of their individual skills and their knowledge. They would be assets at any workplace where they were employed.

During my time at the charity, we conducted research into the social isolation that is experienced by too many people with visual impairment. Our research showed that 90% of our respondents had experienced loneliness. It is important to recognise not only that increasing employment opportunities helps to counter low income and poverty, which still affect far too many blind and partially sighted people, but that being in work, having a workplace to go to and working alongside colleagues helps to tackle isolation, promotes inclusion and improves the quality of life for people with visual impairment in so many other ways as well. It is vital that we create far fairer access to employment for blind and partially sighted people and ensure support is in place for them and for potential employers to achieve that.

In my constituency, the charity Seescape supports more than 4,000 people each year through rehabilitation and through aids, equipment and accessible technology. Those kinds of support are essential to achieving inclusion in the workplace. Seescape's work is transformational for so many blind and partially sighted people, not only in Glenrothes and Mid Fife but throughout the whole Kingdom of Fife. It is hugely valued by our community.

I very much welcome the recommendation in the “Changing Attitudes, Changing Lives” report that the UK Government should partner with sight loss organisations to develop best practice on recruiting blind and partially sighted people and supporting them to enter the labour market. They are the very organisations with the right expertise and knowledge to achieve that goal.

I also endorse the substantive and practical recommendations in that report for the Government and employers. Those recommendations come at an important time, as we look towards the “Get Britain Working” White Paper and the £240 million that will be invested by the Government to promote employability. Following our conversation at Mr Speaker's excellent event to celebrate Disability History Month, I am encouraged by the fact that the Minister, who I welcome to his place, is seized by the opportunity that the White Paper offers to increase disability employment and to set out an effective strategy.

Sadly, in the last few years, there have been cuts in funding for employability at both the UK level and the Scottish level. Not enough has been done to promote opportunities through Access to Work, a scheme that can make a real difference when it is effectively delivered. We need to change that situation by ensuring that the White Paper leads to an employability strategy that actually works for blind and partially sighted people.

In Scotland, employability programmes such as Fair Start Scotland have certainly not had enough success in including people with visual impairment. That needs to change and it can change. We know what works in promoting the employment of blind and partially sighted people: changing attitudes and changing the approaches of employers, in line with the practical recommendations made in the “Changing Attitudes, Changing Lives” report and more broadly in relation to disability.

I also commend the work of the commission led by Lord Shinkwin for the Institute of Directors and its report, “The Future of Business: harnessing diverse talent for success”. That report makes a series of recommendations to Government to create the most favourable conditions for businesses and directors to flourish, with specific reference to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability.



One member of that commission was Dr Theresa Shearer, the chief executive of Enable, where I worked until I was elected to this House; I declare that interest. The All In programme, led by Enable Works, has formed employability partnerships across Scotland that have brought together specialist third sector organisations so that they can collaborate. Those partnerships have had great success in securing training and employment for many people who face barriers to employment, including blind and partially sighted people. Indeed, they have secured three and a half jobs for every one job delivered by traditional employability schemes.

There are many factors involved in improving employment opportunities for blind and partially sighted people; indeed, we could have a separate debate on education and transitions into employment. However, the many important recommendations in the “Changing Attitudes, Changing Lives” report will result in real progress if they are adopted. The first recommendation is essential, namely that we establish a disability employment strategy that sets out measures to improve employers’ attitudes and increase the number of blind and partially sighted people who find and—crucially—retain work.

I commend that report and its recommendations, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea on all she is doing to ensure that its ambitions are fulfilled. Fulfilling them is vital if we are to achieve genuine inclusion for blind and partially sighted people in our society throughout the UK.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Our final Back Bencher, before we move on to the Lib Dem spokesperson, is Lee Pitcher.

10.3 am

**Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): It is great to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on securing this hugely important debate.

I speak today from personal experience. My lovely wife has retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye condition that has no cure or treatment. Julie has reached the stage where she uses a white cane and eventually, like her mum and uncle, she will probably need a guide dog to assist her. Those who watch “Strictly” may know that retinitis pigmentosa is the condition that comedian Chris McCausland has. Like Chris, Julie is an inspiration, not a gimmick, having recently learned to ski blind.

Julie has never let her disability define her; instead, she excels with the abilities that she does have. What we have learned together over 30 years, as our careers have progressed, is how those abilities can allow her to thrive, and I have to say that her workplaces have been enormously supportive of her.

I will focus on the use of technology and the importance of awareness, because the use of artificial intelligence is a game changer. Apps such as Seeing AI can narrate the world around the user. It harnesses the power of AI to open up the visual world, and describes nearby people, texts and objects. In the world of work, it supports people to identify colleagues and helps to facilitate a team culture. As long as those colleagues do not take offence at being taken for a 55-year-old man, as happened to me when the camera was held up to my face—I am in my mid-40s—it is an absolute gem of a research project.

Maximising the use of existing functionality is also important and remarkably useful. Adobe will read out pages of text, and people can ask ChatGPT to find those texts with a simple verbal instruction. My one ask is that when people use hashtags, they should use a capital letter for each new word because that ensures that the hashtag makes sense when read out.

The ability to work from home has opened up a world of opportunity, as meetings and conferences can be accessed from an environment that does not require travel. Although I often witness the kindness of the majority of people when Julie travels on buses or the underground to visit me or work in London, I also witness people who just barge into her as she gets on to an escalator slowly, or who tut because they cannot get past her. I get upset by that. Julie takes no notice because it has become her norm.

There is a broader need in society for people to better understand disabilities, and that starts with education and awareness in school. Will the Minister speak to the relevant Education Minister about how that can be raised as part of the curriculum review?

Future transport technology is also exciting. It may be that when we travel in future, we will jump into our own driverless vehicles and travel to our destinations. When Julie and I visited San Francisco, we saw a driverless taxi for the first time. At the moment, that can be a scary thought, culturally, but it offers a different kind of hope for travel independence in the future, and we should start to embrace what is out there across the globe.

It is great to have all those technologies and the ability to work from anywhere in any part of the world. It is also great to hear that the world is changing.

**Marsha De Cordova:** My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech, and I am pleased that he is talking about technology. Does he agree that many technology companies have cottoned on to the fact that if they make their products inclusive, it is better business for them? Companies such as Apple, Microsoft and others are leading the way by ensuring that their apps and devices such as iPads are accessible, which will help not just blind and partially sighted people, but disabled people in general into work.

**Lee Pitcher:** I could not agree more. There is a whole world of innovation out there, involving companies such as Apple and Microsoft, and we need to embrace that and find a way to channel it into everyday society and use.

As I was saying, it is great to have those technologies, but having them out there is not enough. We need to find a way for people to know about them and use them. The amazing work of organisations such as the RNIB, Guide Dogs, and the Partially Sighted Society in my area of Doncaster is just incredible. They make us aware of what can be done at home and at work through the use of technology.

The challenge for us, and for the 2 million Julies out there in the UK, is how to amplify the work of those organisations to improve employment support for blind and partially sighted people even more, to help employers to understand the technologies and processes that give opportunities for all and allow everyone to thrive. I ask

[Lee Pitcher]

the Minister how he might raise awareness of AI use in the workplace to support adjustments to maximise those opportunities.

I finish with this: I ask you, Dr Huq, to imagine Julie on that slope for the first time, carefully traversing the snow, the ice and the undulations with her white cane, then ditching that cane for ski poles, and hurtling down the mountainside with skill, talent and ability. The “Wow!” that you see on our children’s faces says it all. She is a role model and an inspiration. Anything is achievable with determination and the right support and resources. Let us make sure that everyone gets the opportunity to apply those abilities at home, when travelling to and from work, and at work. I want to see a world where that “Wow!” is visible every day in the workplace.

10.10 am

**Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): Thank you for your sterling chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for securing this debate on an issue that is extremely important, particularly in the light of the recent report. It is extremely helpful that we have the opportunity to debate this matter and engage with the Minister. As the Liberal Democrats work and pensions spokesperson, and as someone who is registered blind, I hope I can bring something to the table.

I am sorry to say that, as has been said, there is sadly still significant discrimination against blind and partially sighted people. Taxis, hotels and restaurants are pinch points where disabled people going about their business often hit hurdles. Hon. Members have alluded to the kindness of strangers, however, and before I had my guide dog, I would occasionally try to use the underground in London. My belief in humanity would always be reaffirmed, as there was much kindness from strangers—the milk of human kindness is out there.

As the Liberal Democrats spokesman, I endorse the findings of the report that we are debating. The most important thing is to ensure that we do things with people, rather than to people, so co-design is extremely important. Tackling discrimination must be part of our agenda, because sadly it is alive and well, and we must strengthen the legislation on it.

Part of the challenge is the legacy of more than a decade of Conservative-led Governments, who have not tackled these issues. Mental health is a particularly challenging area. People who are blind or partially sighted face challenges and hurdles in their lives, so we need to be alive to the fact that the black dog of depression and mental health issues may not be very far away from them. Enhancing our mental health services as part of our general approach would be a real step change in support.

Once upon a time—in the ’80s—I went to the Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford, so I belong to the 1980s Royal National College Facebook page. When I became aware that this debate was coming up, I reached out to people who had gone to the college to see how the world treats them now that they are 50-something, as I am. Although a number of them had positive employment experiences, others had experienced

real challenges. Somebody in their 50s told me that they had had less than a year’s gainful employment during their life, which is shocking. They said that they were able to find voluntary work, but that there were blockages in the way to longer-term employment.

Access to Work is a significant issue, as delays to it have doubled to more than 55,000. We must tackle that issue to drive the positive change that we want to see. People from the Royal National College also spoke to me about the Disability Confident employer scheme, as they are not sure whether it is just virtue signalling and not worth the paper it is written on.

**Marsha De Cordova:** The hon. Member touches on the Disability Confident scheme. Does he agree that for the scheme to be worth the paper it is written on, it needs to have proper quality frameworks in place, so that those who become Disability Confident employers actually employ disabled people? Currently, some employers with that status do not employ a single disabled person.

**Steve Darling:** The hon. Member has clearly been reading my notes, because my next point was that someone cannot be a Disability Confident employer and not employ anyone disabled—she is spot on. I have made some inquiries in this area since getting elected in July, and the problem is that the Government do not measure Disability Confident employers. When I went to my local jobcentre, it said that it did not have to report up to top shop at all, and the Library was not aware of any monitoring by the Government. If we do not measure it, it does not count, so that is a real issue.

Going back to my trip down memory lane to the Royal National College for the Blind, one of the issues I heard from former college friends was that we should not have to go out and champion the Access to Work scheme ourselves; Government should be doing that. It should not be one of Government’s best kept secrets, but sadly it sometimes is. People also described it as an overcomplicated system that had resulted in their not being able to employ support workers as agents. They said it was too complicated and there were too many delays in obtaining support through that scheme.

I represent Torbay, and a resident there tells me that after 30 years of solid work for the national health service, she decided to change employment to Devon in Sight, an outstanding local charity that supports blind and visually impaired people across Devon. Sadly, though, it took three months for payments to come through from Access to Work, which left her with significant financial liabilities. Fortunately she had flexibility in her own finances, but if the next person was coming out of a period of employment and faced financially straitened circumstances, it could have resulted in their not being able to continue with their employment.

I am also aware of a lady from the midlands who was recently made redundant by a large national charity, for which she was a rehabilitation officer. She is now looking to change to a local charity undertaking similar work, but Access to Work is only offering her a support worker one day a week. That is impacting on her personal wellbeing, as she is having to take up the cudgels and battle the scheme over what seems a bizarre offer of help. I would like to challenge the Minister on how we ensure that, when we design new schemes, we are working with people; I would welcome some assurances on that.

I would also like assurances around a project plan for Access to Work. I mentioned that there are 55,000 people in the backlog. I would welcome assurances from the Minister on how we are going to tackle that, with a project plan to do so within a reasonable length of time. Have they done the sums around that? What assurance can the Minister give that it will be up to a 28-day turnaround? Finally, I would like some assurances around Disability Confident, so that it can be a scheme that is valuable, drives positive change and, most of all, drives positive culture change in our society, so that people who are blind or partially sighted can play the active part in our communities that they should be undertaking.

10.19 am

**Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) for his powerful testimony about the enormous opportunities and barriers in this space, and particularly to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) for the work she has done on this topic during her time in Parliament. She serves her constituents and this community very well.

I was struck by the interesting speech by the hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) about the opportunities of AI, which opened my eyes to the huge barriers that blind and partially sighted people have suffered and how technology is helping to overcome those barriers. I pay tribute to his wife: learning to ski with partial sight is a tremendous achievement, so all credit to her.

I echo the points made by other hon. Members about the imperative to overcome and reduce the barriers that blind and partially sighted people face in gaining work and progression in the workplace. Doing so is an absolutely necessary matter of justice to those people themselves; it is entirely wrong that people are discriminated against, directly or indirectly, because of their disability. We therefore have a moral imperative to act. As the hon. Member for Battersea stressed, we also need to reduce barriers to employment for blind and partially sighted people for the sake of the economy; when we exclude blind and partially sighted people from employment and progression in work, the country is denied an enormous wealth of talent.

Finally, addressing remaining barriers to employment and work progression for blind and partially sighted people is necessary for the sake of the taxpayer and the public finances. Our country's disability benefits bill is simply unsustainable. It has risen sharply in recent years and is projected to rise to unsustainable levels over the course of this Parliament. On the current trajectory, spending on health and disability benefits will rise 56%—an additional £27 billion—over the course of this Parliament if change does not happen. Overall, spending on incapacity and disability benefits will rise from 2.4% of GDP to 3% over the course of this Parliament. If we could ensure that people who are currently excluded from the workforce can gain employment and reduce dependence on benefits, we could spend much of that money better in other spaces. I therefore support what the Government aim to do in this space and their plan to get activity back to pre-pandemic levels—a noble aspiration, which my party will support.

There are two ways to approach this question, as has been touched on in the debate so far. The first is the role of the Government themselves in getting the law, benefits system and incentives right in the fiscal, legal and welfare spaces. I am proud to say that my party led the way in ensuring that we as a country tackle discrimination against people with disabilities. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995, introduced by William Hague, required employers to make reasonable adjustments to facilitate the employment of disabled people, and it remains the great landmark and a vital step in this space. We also introduced Access to Work grants, which have been discussed today. I am pleased to say that last year saw the highest number of Access to Work grant applications awarded for over 15 years—68,000, of which 3,000, I understand, were for blind and partially sighted people. That is encouraging.

Nevertheless, we clearly need to go further with Access to Work, as we have heard today. Some innovations were introduced towards the end of the last Parliament, including health adjustment passports, which aim to reduce the time that it takes people to apply for and receive an Access to Work award, by allowing people to take the statement of their disabilities and necessary adjustments from one employer to another. As I understand it, that helpful and practical innovation is now in force. The last Government was also introducing an enhanced Access to Work package, which gave employees more support than they got under the existing scheme, as well as ensuring that employers received support if they were helping to facilitate access to work. Clearly, the process remains onerous and complex—that is a condition that applies across the benefit system with its complex, difficult application process. It only recently went online and it has just become possible for all people to apply for Access to Work digitally. Improvements clearly need to be made.

I am concerned about the extent of the backlog in the application process, which began in the previous Parliament and continues. In September 2023, 22,000 applications remained outstanding; in May 2024, there were 37,000; and in October 2024, 56,000. There are significant problems in processing these applications. I am interested to hear the Minister's views on why that is and what can be done to reduce the backlog.

We need to ensure that the conditionality and incentives in the benefit system and employment support are robust and sensitive. I look forward to the forthcoming White Paper to see how that will be achieved. The hon. Member for Battersea recommends a review of the Equality Act and I welcome contributions there. It will be interesting to see what is suggested to improve that legislation.

I am concerned, however, about proposals that rely on tightening laws—strengthening the stick side of the arrangement, as it were. As the hon. Lady said, there have been a lot of laws and programmes introduced to support blind and partially sighted people—people with disabilities—into employment, yet there are still significant problems helping them to access and progress in work. Rules will only take us so far. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme talked about the role of technology, it struck me that technology will also only take us so far.

There is a danger in looking to technical solutions, whether in the law or technology, that let us off the hook for what really needs to be done. I gently point out



[*Danny Kruger*]

the phenomenon of crowding out: the danger that statutory action can diminish the voluntary action that needs to be taken, in this case by employers, to do the right thing. That is the second approach that is crucial to this space; I am pleased that that was the focus of the hon. Member for Battersea's report and today's debate. We need to look at the attitude and culture of employers, more than the obligations and systemic responses that Government can make. Of course, Government can significantly influence the attitude of employers but, to quote the Royal National Institute of Blind People:

"There are no hard and fast rules"

when supporting disabled people at work. We should avoid making assumptions about what blind and partially sighted people can do. That is why we need a flexible approach, in which employers use their imagination and intelligence, in consultation with employees, to develop access for blind and partially sighted people in the workplace.

The way to do that is to stress the opportunity, the benefits that employers will reap and, frankly, how easy it is. I was struck by the hon. Lady's story of what good looks like in the workplace. It sounds like human beings being human towards each other, being genuinely inclusive, ensuring that people help their colleagues literally to navigate the workplace. One can imagine the enormous benefit to that workplace and all employees when there is a culture of inclusivity and generosity, as the hon. Lady described.

The key is awareness. Many of the changes needed to make workplaces accessible are not difficult; they just need to be done deliberately as part of the policy of the Government. I welcome the practical recommendations in the hon. Lady's report, and I look forward to seeing what the White Paper will do to implement them. I respect the Minister and his colleagues, who are genuinely dedicated to improving employment and employability. I am pleased to see what has been trailed for the White Paper, with a focus on skills, devolution, empowering local communities and opportunities for young people.

I very much hope that the White Paper will work with employers in the spirit of the report we are debating, rather than against them, but I am concerned by the policies that the Government have announced so far with respect to employers. The national insurance rise will result in thousands of pounds of taxation on every job, and new burdens on employers are being created through the Employment Rights Bill. Those are not good portents of an employer-friendly approach. Nevertheless, on this issue we agree about the direction of travel that needs to be taken, and I very much hope that my party works with the Government to progress the very helpful recommendations that the hon. Member for Battersea has made.

10.30 am

**The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms):** I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on securing this important and illuminating debate, and on the way she introduced it. She has a very deep commitment to this issue, as I know from her long-term work on the all-party parliamentary group. I commend

her for that, and I also commend RNIB and the Thomas Pocklington Trust, which support that group by providing the secretariat.

It was welcome to hear hon. Members share their personal experiences. The hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) was absolutely right to remind us of the continuing problem of discrimination in work. It has not gone away and still needs to be addressed. It was great to hear about Julie's experience of skiing—my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) made his point very powerfully. I visited the Paralympics in Paris for a couple for a couple of days in the summer, and it was inspiring to see the accomplishments of people who are disabled and how much potential they have to contribute. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to do more to realise that potential in our economy and our society.

We all know about RNIB, and I am also familiar with the work of the Thomas Pocklington Trust thanks to my former constituent Helen Mitchell, who is one of its trustees. She arranged for me to pay a very useful and informative visit to its headquarters last year. I pay tribute to it for its work.

As the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) said, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions set out, in a speech in Barnsley in July, our plans to reform the Department for Work and Pensions: rather than being the Department for welfare, it will be the Department for work. Our ambition is an 80% rate of employment, which would be the highest we have ever achieved in the UK. The hon. Member for East Wiltshire is absolutely right to remind us that the current rate of economic activity is still less than it was before the pandemic, so we still have a good deal of ground to make up.

To achieve that ambition, we have to do much better at supporting disabled people, including blind and partially sighted people, into work. We will not achieve our ambition without that. We want people with visual impairments, who, as we have been reminded, have great skills and talents to offer, to have equal chances to enter and thrive in the labour market. We cannot continue with the 40% visual impairment employment gap, which my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea mentioned, and is spelled out in the APPG report. We will collaborate with visually impaired people and organisations advocating for them to work out how we can meet their needs and support them better.

We do not want people with visual impairments to have to give up work, as is too often the case. The hon. Member for Torbay helpfully told us about the experiences of people he was at college with in the 1980s. We want people to be able to stay in work and not have to give it up. If they lose their job, they should be able to get back into work. Having gone into work, they should be able to progress and do well.

As announced in the King's Speech in July, in the Equality (Race and Disability) Bill we will fulfil our manifesto commitment to tackle the disability pay gap, which my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea highlighted and which other Members also referred to. Additionally, our "Get Britain Working" White Paper, which will indeed be published soon, will announce crucial reforms to employment support. We will change the way that we measure success. For example, we will focus not simply on getting people into a job, but on ensuring that they

can stay in work and can progress to higher earnings in the future. We want to support people in the longer term.

We will also overhaul jobcentres. My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme made an interesting point about the importance of assistive technology in jobcentres. We will introduce a new youth guarantee, so that in future nobody will be left on the scrapheap when they are young.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea was absolutely right to point out that to achieve all that, we need healthy and inclusive workplaces. There are many employers who excel at creating inclusive workplaces in relation to health and disability, and it was very good to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme about his wife's positive experiences with her employers. However, the APPG's report points out that many other employers recognise the value of providing an inclusive workplace and would like to provide one, but they need support to do so; at the moment, they do not feel in a position to do so.

Consequently, we are considering what more we can do to help, because preventing people from leaving the workforce and enabling more people to return to work after absences is a good thing. It is definitely good for the individuals concerned; it is good for their mental health and their sense of fulfilment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker), and the hon. Members for Torbay and for East Wiltshire, reminded us. However, it is also good for businesses and wider society.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife referred to the work of Lord Shinkwin for the Institute for Directors. I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of that work and I look forward to meeting Lord Shinkwin and discussing some of these issues with him in the near future.

The Disability Confident scheme, which has been referred to in the debate, is a very important resource that we already have. It featured in the APPG's report, my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes and Mid Fife mentioned it, and the hon. Member for Torbay dedicated a good part of his speech to it. That scheme provides a strong platform, with more than 19,000 employers participating in it. It promotes good, inclusive employment and recruitment practices. It supports employers to deliver them and to become able to attract, recruit, retain and develop disabled people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea was absolutely right to underline the importance of accessible recruitment processes in making sure that people are not barred from applying for jobs in the first place. In the Disability Confident scheme, there are many committed employers who are enthusiastic about making recruitment processes accessible and who are determined to do well in that regard. However, I agree with my hon. Friend and with the hon. Member for Torbay that the Disability Confident scheme can do more. I have had some encouraging recent conversations about that, for example, with the Business Disability Forum. Working with both employers and disabled people, we will examine how we can make the Disability Confident scheme more robust and how it can achieve more of its potential. I am convinced that potential is there, but we must realise more of it in future.

We also support employers with a digital information service and in increasing access to occupational health services, which the previous Government rightly recognised was important.

**Jim Shannon:** In my contribution, I outlined some of the things that we are doing in Northern Ireland. Obviously, that was to help the Minister with ideas that could be used here on the mainland. The Minister has outlined a number of things that are happening here. Does he intend to contact the relevant body in the Northern Ireland Assembly to ensure that we can work better together, share ideas, do things better and make life better for the people we are here for?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I certainly welcome opportunities to do that. We need to learn from all the devolved Governments in the UK. There are interesting things happening in Scotland, for example, on social security, and in Northern Ireland, so I am grateful to the hon. Member for drawing my attention to a number of those. I am keen to pursue that further.

Disabled people and those with health conditions are a diverse group. The right work and health support in the right place at the right time is key. The contribution of Jobcentre Plus work coaches and disability employment advisers, who play an important role in jobcentres, is vital to this topic. I pay tribute to the dedication of those who are working on this at Jobcentre Plus. We will join up health and employment support around the individual. That will be through, for example, employment advisers in NHS talking therapies—seeing the NHS increasingly embrace the importance of supporting people into work—and individual placement and support in primary care.

My hon. Friends the Members for Battersea and for Glenrothes and Mid Fife, and the hon. Members for Torbay, for Strangford and for East Wiltshire, all spoke about Access to Work, rightly reflecting its crucial importance. The scheme provides grants for workplace adjustments beyond what is provided by the employer. Let us be clear that Access to Work does not replace an employer's duty under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments, as the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) pointed out in his intervention. There are clear statutory obligations here that need to be delivered. Access to Work, however, can provide funding for support workers, specialist aids and equipment, personalised support and workplace assessments, travel to or in work, and mental health support.

The hon. Member for Torbay referred to it as one of the best kept secrets, but demand for Access to Work has been growing fast. The hon. Member for East Wiltshire rightly reported that nearly 68,000 people had Access to Work support approved in the last financial year, an increase of almost a third on the previous year. It is now growing rapidly. As he said, it supported 3,850 people who reported their primary medical condition as difficulty in seeing. That is about 8% of the people who are supported by the scheme. Customers with difficulty seeing as their primary medical condition received a bigger proportion—13% or £33 million—of the total expenditure. Access to Work is making an important contribution.

We are committed to reducing the waiting times for Access to Work. Delivery of the support has been streamlined. We have more staff processing the claims.

[Sir Stephen Timms]

Customers starting a job within four weeks are prioritised to ensure that they get help in time. Since April, as the hon. Member for East Wiltshire pointed out, all the core parts of the scheme are now online. However, I agree that more needs to be done. I welcome the engagement of all Members who have taken part in the debate and their continuing pressure to ensure that Access to Work delivers on its potential.

As has been highlighted, the APPG report rightly referred to the importance of technology in enabling visually impaired people to be in work. The report specifically mentioned text-to-speech software. Last week I visited Sense College Loughborough, a facility originally developed by RNIB. A visually impaired student there showed me the ZoomText application—which I was not aware of previously—using it to magnify the text he was looking at on a screen, and to manage a document over two screens. He commended its helpfulness to me.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme is absolutely right to point out just how big a game changer AI can be. We must realise that opportunity.

Access to Work can help provide assistive tech, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea pointed out in her intervention, suppliers such as Apple and Microsoft are increasingly bundling assistive tech with their standard products, partly because, as she said, it helps all users and makes the products easier to use for everybody. The technology is coming on in leaps and bounds. It is moving very fast, and we need to make sure that people have access to it. I am looking at what the Government can do in this area to make the technology better known, because a lot of people who have it on their devices do not know that it is there; to make assistive technology more readily available, where it is not bundled in with the standard product; and, maybe on occasion, to commission research to tackle a specific accessibility problem. We are thinking about this, and I welcome ideas and suggestions from Members about what more we can do.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme and others are absolutely right to point out how much more we need to do to support blind and partially sighted people into employment to enable them both to achieve their aspirations and to make their full contribution to our society and economy. That is in their interest and in all our interest. I am encouraged by what the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire, said about this. I hope that, when hon. Members read the “Get Britain Working” White Paper, as they will soon be able to do, they will agree that we are taking the right steps towards reaching that goal.

10.47 am

**Marsha De Cordova:** First, I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions. That includes the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon.

Friends the Members for Glenrothes and Mid Fife (Richard Baker) and for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger).

I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for Social Security and Disability on his response to this important debate. His commitment to this issue really came across, as did his drive to make the change. It has been a good debate; every contribution brought something different and important, particularly on the opportunities of technology. I am a big advocate—forgive me—of Apple. Apple changed my life. When the iPhone and the iPad came out, they enabled me to read newspapers, finally. There are other providers out there, obviously, but it did really change my life.

Making use of AI is also important. I recently met representatives of a company called Be My Eyes, and I was bowled over by how its AI worked: you put these pretty swanky glasses on and look down, and the glasses read everything in front of you or describe what is around you. That will be game changing once they are available to everybody.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme for his skiing tips. I will have to have a proper chat with him, because I have always wanted to ski, but I was held back. Hearing that my hon. Friend’s wife is doing it, I am absolutely up for it now.

On a more serious point, it is a shame that, in 2024, we are still debating this issue. However, after 14 years, it is truly amazing that we now have a Labour Government who are committed to changing the experience, not only of blind and partially sighted people, but more importantly of disabled people as a whole, when it comes to engaging with the labour market.

I thank the Minister for Social Security and Disability. He is a friend, and I know he is a good listener, because I talk his ear off on these issues a lot. None the less, he is also a man of action, so I look forward to working with him and his colleagues.

I want to press my final point: this is not just about the Department for Work and Pensions; it is about working cross-Government, in particular with the Department for Business and Trade, the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care, so that we can bring about the transformative change that will lead to changing attitudes and, most importantly, changing lives.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered employment support for blind and partially sighted people.

10.50 am

*Sitting suspended.*



## Global Plastics Treaty

11 am

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** I will call Dr Simon Opher to move the motion and I believe there will be one other small speech before the Minister responds. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up on this occasion, as this is only a 30-minute debate.

**Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Global Plastics Treaty.

I thank you, Dr Huq, for chairing this debate, and the Minister for attending. Plastic pollution is putting all of Earth's systems under stress. There is no corner of the world, from the top of Mount Everest to the bottom of the ocean, that is untouched by plastic pollution. Microplastics are accumulating in our bodies, in our vital organs, and in breast milk and placentas, and current levels of plastic production expose us to more than 16,000 harmful chemicals daily and to increasing volumes of microplastics.

Plastic pollution is putting the Earth's ecosystems and natural processes under serious strain, worsening climate change, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification and land use—and if you think the situation is bad now, it could be much worse in decades to come. Plastic production, which is already far too high for our planet's systems to cope with, is set to triple by 2050. The impact on climate change will be monumental. In its current state and with its current growth trajectory, plastic production will make achieving net zero impossible.

Plastic production already has a global warming impact four times greater than that of the aviation industry, with 90% of emissions coming during the production process. By 2050, half of global oil demand will come from petrochemicals. Plastic production is out of control, and everyone agrees that there is a problem. In 2022, 175 countries agreed to come together to hammer out a global treaty to address plastic pollution, but after two years and with four out of five scheduled rounds of negotiations completed, we are still in the dark about what the treaty will really look like.

**Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD):** I thank the hon. Member for bringing forward this important debate. The last Government oversaw soaring rates of plastic incineration, and delays to modest waste reforms such as deposit return schemes, while also refusing to support proposals to cut plastic production by 40% by 2040, which were put forward at the last round of the treaty negotiations. Does the hon. Member agree that the new Government must raise their ambition levels, and that the best way to do so is to deliver a global plastics treaty that meaningfully cuts plastic production?

**Dr Opher:** I certainly do agree with you, and it is one reason that I am delivering this speech; thank you for that.

It might seem obvious that plastic pollution cannot be addressed without significant cuts to the production of plastics, but that is the most controversial and politically challenging aspect of the treaty. Those involved want us to believe that we can recycle our way out of this crisis—something we know not to be true. Plastic can be recycled only a finite number of times, simply delaying

the inevitable moment when it is burned or dumped in landfill, or even escapes into our environment. The fact is that oversupply of virgin plastics at ever lower prices is undermining the UK's ambition to create a circular economy here in the UK.

Earlier this week, the BBC reported that a recycling site in Avonmouth, near Bristol—which is near my constituency of Stroud—is closing down due to low recycling rates and challenging market conditions. Last month, the industry body Plastics Recyclers Europe raised the alarm about a downward trend in plastics recycling as a result of the global glut of cheap virgin plastics. Flooding the world with cheap plastic allows no space for reuse and refill systems, and the recycling industry, to develop.

Here in the UK, we deal with an excess of plastic waste by burning it and dumping it on poorer countries that do not have the infrastructure to deal with it. Both practices were allowed to increase under the previous Government, as the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) said, and the public are rightly outraged. That is why many of my constituents have written to me about plastic pollution, and more than half a million people have signed a petition calling for a strong global plastics treaty.

Earlier this year, over 220,000 people decided to take part in the Big Plastic Count—a massive citizen science project where individuals count every piece of plastic waste that they dispose of for a week. The results showed that the UK throws away 1.7 billion pieces of plastic each week, with 58% of that being incinerated, producing toxic fumes and greenhouse gases. Incineration is the UK's dirtiest form of power generation, and incinerators are three times more likely to be placed in poorer neighbourhoods, as was the case with the one built recently in the Stroud area.

Fortunately, the new Government have taken bold steps to tackle plastic pollution. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has made zero waste one of the Department's core missions, and has set up a circular economy taskforce.

**Sarah Dyke:** My constituent Catherine Conway is the founder of GoUnpackaged, the world's first modern zero-waste shop, which is hugely reducing the use of single-use plastics. She is also part of the Refill Coalition, which is developing and testing a standardised solution to deliver refills at scale in store and online. Does the hon. Member agree that zero-waste solutions such as these have a big role to play in accelerating the transition to a more circular economy that maximises the recovery, reuse, recycling and remanufacturing of products?

**Dr Opher:** Thank you—

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Order. The Clerk is telling me that “you” is not usually used to refer to other Members, only to the Chair. The Clerk keeps telling me to say this; I have restrained myself so far, but it is one of the conventions of this unusual workplace.

**Dr Opher:** I do apologise, Dr Huq. I shall try to do better.

As I was saying, the Environment Secretary has made zero waste one of the Department's core missions, and has set up a circular economy taskforce. This is a good move and will create jobs in repair, rental and recycling,

[Dr Opher]

as well as will significantly reducing CO2 emissions. The reuse of plastics, and not just recycling, is also incredibly important. It has perhaps dropped down the agenda a little, and we need to emphasise the point, so I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton for her intervention.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Member agree that these treaties are great in theory, but that support is needed to reach the targets, and that that support must not simply be in the form of help for developing nations? The steps needed are understandable and necessary, but they must start at home at the local council level, with additional funding to allow our nation to pull up our own socks and make meaningful differences to our plastic production and use.

**Dr Opher:** I thank the hon. Member for raising that point. I do believe that green initiatives and recycling have to begin at home; we have to do our own bit first and then spread the word.

The Government signed the Bridge to Busan declaration, joining over 40 countries in reaffirming the need for plastic production cuts to be included in the final treaty. The treaty needs to go further; we need a treaty that delivers a strong global target to cut plastic production, that is ambitious about the level of cuts to global production, and that is specific about how much to cut production and by when, with a global target that is legally binding.

The plastics treaty is the third time in quick succession that this Government's international climate and nature leadership has been tested. The UK demonstrated our ambitions at the biodiversity COP in Cali, Colombia, and was one of the only countries to announce a genuinely ambitious nationally determined contribution at the COP29 in Baku. The plastics treaty is another vital opportunity for the UK to demonstrate once again that it is a progressive actor on the world stage, prepared to face down polluting industries and to put the brakes on the climate and nature emergency. That leadership role is needed now more than ever, particularly in sustainable energy and in recycling.

Other countries are looking to the UK, reinvigorated by our new Government, to give the treaty process the injection of impetus and ambition that it needs to get over the line. My ask of the Government today is this: are they willing to demonstrate international leadership and commit to doing everything possible to bring the treaty over the line?

11.9 am

**Uma Kumaran** (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this important debate ahead of the fifth session of the intergovernmental negotiating committee on plastic pollution, which begins next week in Busan, Korea. He mentioned the all-important biodiversity COP in Cali, Colombia. I was proud to be part of the UK's cross-party official delegation making the case for climate and nature at that important gathering.

I have heard from many constituents in Stratford and Bow who are deeply concerned about the environmental harm caused by plastic waste in our rivers and oceans. They want to see ambitious action here at home as well

as on a global scale, and they want the UK to be a global leader. According to the UN Environment Programme, 1 million plastic bottles are purchased every minute, and half of all plastic produced is designed for single-use purposes—it is used once and just thrown away.

We have long known about the harm that plastic pollution causes. Microplastics are prevalent in our natural world, where they damage environmental health and our rivers and canals and impact our oceans' carbon sequestration. My hon. Friend set out the effects on our bodies: 77% of people have microplastics in their blood, and the most commonly detected plastic is PET, which is used to make single-use plastic bottles.

Why am I, the Member for Stratford and Bow, speaking in this important debate? East London is where Alexander Parkes invented the first thermoplastic in 1877, but nearly 150 years later it is the proud home of innovative work to end the harm caused by single-use plastic. Earlier this month, I visited Notpla, a world-changing start-up based in my constituency. In 2022 it won the Earthshot prize for its work on creating an alternative to plastic made from seaweed and plants. Notpla has already replaced 13 million single-use plastic products with its technology, which biodegrades as fast as orange peel. It is not just changing how we use and dispose of plastic waste, but seeking to end our addiction to single-use plastics altogether. It is just one example of the creativity and ambition that already exists, which is needed to support the Government's commitment to reduce waste by moving to a circular economy. But we need to go further and faster, and I think that that is something we all agree on in this room.

Alongside such innovation, global interventions and collective effort are needed to control and prevent marine plastic pollution, to safeguard human and ecological health and to defend against biodiversity loss. Next week's meeting of the intergovernmental negotiating committee is a pivotal moment. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud and my constituents in Stratford and Bow in calling on all member states present at Busan to push for legally binding instruments based on a comprehensive approach that addresses the full life cycle of plastics. This is a huge opportunity for climate and nature leadership on the world stage, and an opportunity to guarantee a safer, cleaner planet for all of us and for future generations.

11.12 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. It is lovely to see you here. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this really important debate, and Members on both sides of the House for their valuable contributions. This is an important topic that people really care about.

This week, I had the most effective lobbying I have ever had; I was lobbied by 12 primary school children who came with a message in a bottle—they literally brought a bottle with a message and a petition from Greenpeace calling on me to do everything I can to secure plastic reduction. They too had taken part in the Great Plastic Count, and even the youngest, who was only seven years old, told me about all the plastic that

they had. I just wanted to give a special mention to those children from Bonner primary school. This is Parliament Week, when we encourage young people to get involved in politics and understand how Parliament works, so it is a good time to engage with everybody across the country on this important issue.

**Sarah Dyke:** Carymoor Environmental Trust in my constituency runs fantastic plastic sessions and has educated over 58,000 children in Somerset about the environmental impact of plastic and about ways to avoid single-use plastic. Does the Minister agree that the best way to avoid single-use plastic is to deliver a global plastics treaty that meaningfully cuts plastic production?

**Emma Hardy:** Absolutely. The global plastics treaty, which I will talk about in more detail, is crucial, and it is really encouraging to see how everybody is getting behind it.

**Karl Turner** (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The Minister talked about being lobbied by children, and we all know how effective kids are when they lobby their MPs. I also want to mention the education work that The Deep in Hull does with children on plastic pollution, which is impressive, to put it mildly. On the topic of education, the University of Hull has recently carried out research showing that 8 million tonnes of plastic ends up in the sea, making up 80% of the debris in our oceans.

**Emma Hardy:** I thank my hon. Friend. I am not meant to show bias, but The Deep is fantastic; we should all go and visit it. My hon. Friend is absolutely right—it does incredible work in educating children about ocean conservation, nature and plastic use. It is an amazing asset for the constituency I represent, and its work is highly regarded internationally.

I move on to talk about the treaty in more detail. After two years of negotiations, we are approaching the fifth and final scheduled meeting of the intergovernmental negotiating committee, which starts on 25 November. The executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, Inger Andersen, has referred to this treaty as

“the most significant environmental multilateral deal since the Paris accord.”

We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to agree an ambitious treaty to end plastic pollution, and that is why an agreement at Busan this year is critical. If we are to stop plastic entering the environment at an increasing rate, we need a treaty that provides actions at all stages of the plastics life cycle. We are proud, as a country, to be a founding member of the High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution. That coalition includes more than 60 countries, and calls for an ambitious and effective treaty that will end plastic pollution by 2040. In September, the High Ambition Coalition published a ministerial statement calling for an ambitious treaty that covers the full life cycle of plastics, including design, production, consumption and end of life. Then, on 24 September, the UK signed the Bridge to Busan declaration, which makes the case for an ambitious treaty that includes upstream measures to ensure the sustainable consumption and production of primary plastic polymers.

It is critical that the new treaty on plastic pollution takes action across the entire life cycle, including production and consumption. The evidence is clear that we cannot solve the problem of plastic pollution unless we take action at every stage. Global plastic production is projected to double by 2050, reaching 800 million metric tonnes annually. Evidence shows that on current trends, waste management infrastructure will not be able to keep up with the pace of plastic production and consumption, and the level of mismanaged plastic waste will continue to rise. That is why the UK supports binding provisions in the treaty to reduce the production and consumption of primary plastic polymers to sustainable levels, and to enable the transition to a circular economy.

To end plastic pollution, we need all actors in the plastics value chain to act. That includes national and local governments, and the private and financial sectors. We need to bring everyone along with us. That includes the marginalised, undervalued and unrecognised waste pickers, most of whom are women. They handle more than half the world’s plastic waste for recycling, so it is important that their voices are heard.

We have partnered with the Ocean Plastics Leadership Network to run the UK treaty dialogues ahead of each round of negotiations. The dialogues include actors at all stages of the plastic value chains, as well as from academia and environmental non-governmental organisations. Those dialogues have helped us understand the views on the treaty to inform our approach to negotiations.

On 6 November, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I, in conjunction with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, hosted a plastic pollution treaty roundtable for business leaders, retailers and financial institutions. We discussed the importance of agreeing an ambitious, legally binding treaty to end plastic pollution. Participants also signed a statement setting out the key elements that the treaty must include in order to end plastic pollution by 2040.

Many businesses and organisations are leading the way already. An example of this is the Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty, which has been joined by more than 85 organisations, including major global businesses, financial institutions and NGOs. The UK scientific community is also world-leading and playing an active role in ensuring that the treaty negotiations are grounded in science, as well as developing the solutions and innovations that will help us take action on this issue.

However, we also recognise the importance of mobilising support for countries most in need, in order to implement the treaty, and this is an essential element of its effectiveness. We can end plastic pollution only through globally co-ordinated action and by mobilising and aligning financial flows from all sources, including all actors and stakeholders across the full plastics value chain at both the global and the local stage. The UK supports the use of the Global Environmental Facility to support the implementation of the treaty. It has established a track record of supporting environmental agreements on climate and biodiversity.

**Dr Opher:** Does the Minister know why there is no shadow Minister here to contribute to the debate for the Opposition?



**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** I can answer that, actually. It is only a 30-minute debate, so it is very bare bones and there is no opportunity for the mover of the motion to respond and no Opposition spokesperson. It is not that they did not turn up.

**Dr Opher:** Okay. Thank you.

**Emma Hardy:** I have to say that this is one thing on which I believe there is cross-party consensus. There seems to be an awful lot of support for the treaty, and I hope that that unity continues, especially as we are going into incredibly difficult negotiations. It is really important for us as a country to stand united behind the treaty and what it means if we are not only to seek an agreement, but to ensure that it is fulfilled. I would like to hope that everyone agrees on how important this is, but I am an optimist—what can I say?

The UK is already the largest donor to the Global Plastic Action Partnership, which brings together Governments, businesses and civil society to tackle plastic pollution and increase investment in circular economy approaches in countries eligible for official development assistance.

I was asked what we are doing as a country to reduce plastic packaging. We plan to lay regulations on a deposit return scheme for drinks containers in England and Northern Ireland before Parliament in late 2024—hopefully before Christmas—for them to come into force in early 2025, assuming that parliamentary time allows. The planned launch date of the scheme is October 2027. If we are going to argue what other countries need to do, it is important that we are seen to be taking action ourselves. I really appreciate that companies—my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford and Bow (Uma Kumaran) mentioned one in her constituency—are promoting innovative and more sustainable solutions to plastic pollution, especially from single-use plastics.

Plastic pollution is one of the greatest long-term global challenges we face, and the UK is committed to working with the chair and members of the intergovernmental negotiating committee to reach an agreement. All parties are committed to seeking to conclude negotiations on the treaty by the end of 2024. We need to secure a robust, ambitious treaty to accelerate action at pace and scale, and that is what the UK team will be pushing for in Busan.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud again for securing the debate, and I thank everyone else who has supported it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.22 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Apprenticeships and T-Levels

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered apprenticeships and T Levels. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher.

UK productivity is well below that of the United States, Germany and France. That is not a new thing; it has been true in every year I have been alive. If we were able to fix that productivity gap, we could have higher living standards, lower tax and more tax revenue. There are multiple reasons for the gap and much academic literature has been written on it, but the level of skills in an economy is fundamental to productivity and therefore to growth. How we run our skills system is also important, because there is a cadre of young people who are less orientated towards pure academic study but have talent and flair in technical pursuits, and they deserve just the same opportunities and life chances as those who take the academic route.

In this country, although we are famous for aspects of our education system, including for our higher education—our universities—and increasingly for aspects of our school system, we are not, I am afraid, famous for technical and vocational education and training. When foreign Ministers come to Europe to look at vocational education, they tend to go to Germany, and if there is one thing we do not like in England, it is losing out to Germany.

It is right that successive Governments have been troubled by this situation and sought to fix it, but perhaps sometimes they have been a bit too quick to look for a fix. The story of our organisational infrastructure for technical and vocational provision is not one of stability. We have had industrial training boards, the Manpower Services Commission, the Training Commission, and training and enterprise councils—TECs. But those TECs were different from another TEC—the Technician Education Council, which existed alongside the Business Education Council, BEC. The two would eventually merge, of course, to give us BTECs. There were national training organisations; the Learning and Skills Council; sector skills councils; the UK Commission for Employment and Skills; the Skills Funding Agency, or SFA, which would later be the ESFA—the Education and Skills Funding Agency—and, most recently, local skills improvement plans and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education.

The infrastructure has been mirrored by a panoply of qualifications and awards. We have had traditional apprenticeships and then modern apprenticeships; the youth training scheme; the City & Guilds system; the technical and vocational education initiative; the National Council for Vocational Qualifications; NVQs, which are still in use; and GNVQs, which evolved into BTECs and diplomas. There were the 14 to 19 diplomas, which were not quite the same thing as the Tomlinson diplomas; the skills for life programme; and traineeships. Altogether, today, there are somewhere between 100 and 200 recognised awarding organisations, excluding those that only do apprenticeship end-point assessments.

Now, just at level 3—the equivalent to A-levels—we have the following qualifications: tech levels as well as T-levels; applied generals; level 3 ESOL; level 3 NVQ, and access to higher education diplomas. There is a level 3 award, a level 3 certificate and a level 3 diploma—or someone might prefer a level 3 national certificate or a level 3 national diploma. There is also an extended diploma, a subsidiary diploma, and a technical introductory diploma. There is no official count, but by the mid-2010s someone had counted up what they could find and said that, together with other, non-level 3 courses available to 16 to 18-year-olds, there were at least 13,000 possible qualifications that someone in that age group could do. It is not surprising that when the Independent Panel on Technical Education was created in 2015-16, it found that vocational education and training had become “over-complex”.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for securing this important debate. Some 6.9% of young people in Somerset are believed to be not in education, employment or training, which is higher than the national average of 5.5%. Does he agree that the Government should not only improve the quality of vocational education, but strengthen the careers advice and links with employers in schools and colleges, to enable more young people to get into education on the right courses?

**Damian Hinds:** Indeed—the hon. Member is absolutely right. Part of the point of careers advice is knowing which course to take and which qualification to pursue. The panel that I mentioned found that if someone was considering a career in plumbing, for example, there were 33 different qualifications that they might seek to take. It also found that in general the various qualifications were not providing the skills needed; they had become divorced from the occupations they were meant to serve, with no requirement, or only a weak requirement, to meet employers’ needs in those occupations.

The panel’s report, which came out in April 2016, became a blueprint for a major upgrade of technical and vocational education in this country. The panel was determined to address both the productivity gap and very clearly also the social justice gap, whereby some young people were being left behind. I stress that although the report was a blueprint, it was also a “redprint”: the panel was chaired by the noble Lord Sainsbury, the distinguished Labour peer. The report called for “a fundamental shift”, with

“a coherent technical education option...from levels 2...to...5”.

There would be 15 clearly defined sector routes, covering 35 different career pathways. Three of those routes would be available only through an apprenticeship; the other 12 would be available either through an apprenticeship or a college track, and there would be common standards for both. Both the apprenticeship and college-based routes would result in

“the same or equivalent technical knowledge, skills and behaviours” to take into the workplace. The report said that this path

“needs to be clearly delineated from the academic option, as they are designed for different purposes. But, at the same time, movement between the two must be possible...in either direction”.

The report also recommended expanding the then Institute for Apprenticeships into an Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, so as to cover both apprenticeship and college tracks. It added:

“Specifying the standards...is not a role for officials in central government but for professionals working in...occupations, supported by...education professionals.”

It recommended that there should be improvements to apprenticeships and a new, largely college-based qualification, which would become known as the T-level.

With T-levels, the knowledge, skills content and required behaviours are set not by somebody at the Department of Education but by employers. There is the core technical qualification, but there is also content in English, maths and digital. Crucially, there is a 45-day industrial placement. There are also more college hours than with traditional vocational qualifications and indeed more taught hours per week than for A-levels.

For the upgrade that we needed in our country, in both productivity and opportunities available to all young people, T-levels had to become the principal college-based option—not the only option, but the principal or main college-based vocational qualification. And the T-level could not be grafted on to a market that already had thousands of qualifications; there was an incumbency advantage and even commercial interests attached to some of those. It had to replace a number—a lot—of qualifications. Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister, has been speaking about this quite recently.

The other thing that was always going to be difficult about T-levels was finding enough industry placements. Lord Sainsbury found that we might need up to 250,000 industry placements for 17-year-olds, and that, of course, is hard to achieve. We could say that it is too hard and give up, but if we did that we would be giving up on advancing our competitiveness.

The alternative is that we change culture in our country and say to companies that if they want to be a great success in their sector, and their sector to be a great success in our country, and our whole country to be a success in the world, we all have to invest both the resource and the time in the next generation.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I do not disagree with the right hon. Member on that point; I just wanted to highlight that in my constituency of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes there is an apprenticeship provider called CATCH. Local businesses have come together to invest in a brand-new welding apprenticeship facility that will deliver 1,000 apprentices over the next few years. Is that the kind of partnership working that he envisages, which works well for local communities, young people and business?

**Damian Hinds:** I am sure it is. I will come to apprenticeships in a moment, but I was just talking about industry placements in T-levels.

From speaking to young people who are doing T-levels, colleagues will know that their most popular feature is probably the fact that young people get to do a real role in a real workplace. The placements are also popular with the employers that provide T-levels: first, the employers are investing in the next generation and helping develop all the things the lack of which they sometimes complain about—soft skills and workplace skills—and secondly, the placements are the most fantastic, longest-ever job

[*Damian Hinds*]

interview, when employers get to see the people who may come and work in their company over an extended period. I appeal to Ministers to carry on the great work of shouting about T-levels and talking about these great opportunities and the upgrade they represent.

There were two big changes to apprenticeships. The first ensured that there were minimum standards. Previously, as colleagues will recall, some apprenticeships were so thin and flimsy that the apprentices did not know they were on one. After minimum standards came in, apprenticeships would last at least one year and involve at least 20% of time off the job. As with T-levels, there would be an end-point assessment, which would feature standards set by employers.

The second big change was the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. That has always been controversial with some employers, but it was there to do two things. First, it raises the funds needed to pay for a big upgrade in apprenticeship provision. Secondly, it deals with the free rider problem, with which we will all be familiar: some companies in a sector have always strongly invested in young people, but three years later those young people leave to work for another employer that can offer to pay more but has not made the investment in the first place. The apprenticeship levy deals directly with that free rider problem, as economists call it, so that every sizeable company contributes properly.

The new Government plan to change the scope of the levy and to introduce two new types of apprenticeship, which it is fair to say we do not know a huge amount about: foundation apprenticeships and shorter apprenticeships. There is an argument that we already make the word “apprenticeship” do a lot of work—it covers a wide spectrum. Arguably, there are three types of development of self and training, which have different needs: someone may be a career starter, career developer or career changer, and the specifications of the courses and qualifications are different. For example, a 50-year-old who is changing career does not need to learn as many things about what it is like to enter a workplace for the first time as an 18-year-old does. In truth, only one of those types of training is what a normal member of the public associates with the word “apprentice”: we think typically of people who are young and starting out on their working journey.

It is totally legitimate to look at changing what the levy covers, and it is good to refocus on young people—career starters. It is also reasonable to say that the levy could cover some things that are not apprenticeships, such as management development or traineeships, but there is huge value in maintaining integrity around what we mean by the word “apprenticeship”, and keeping a minimum length and quantity of college or off-work content.

Whatever the Government do with the levy, they need to find a way to deal with the free rider problem. The Government will always be lobbied by companies saying, “We should be able to use the levy for this, that and the other”, but if “this, that and the other” means training that they would have paid for anyway, then the levy will not have achieved its goal. It has to be something that creates a net increase in the amount of training and development available.

That brings me to Skills England. Now, Ministers like shiny new things, and some people will always lobby for things to change. A sweet spot is found in public policy when the two coincide: Ministers get lobbied to do something, and they think they have come up with a shiny new thing that sounds like it will achieve those ends. Skills England is one of those things; I am afraid that, without major design change, it is doomed to failure. I have no doubt that plenty of people who lobbied the Government when they were in opposition said, “We need a different approach to skills. We need to think about them across Government, take the long view, listen to employers, listen to young people and have an integrated approach.” The Government have come up with this thing called Skills England, which they think will do that.

Skills England will be the 13th new skills agency in five decades. If all it took to solve our skills and productivity problem was a change in the machinery of government, do the Government not think that one of the previous 12 might already have managed it? The instinct in difficult circumstances is to break glass and reach for a quango, but Skills England is not even a quango; it is nada—not quasi-autonomous, but a non-accountable departmental agency—and there is no reason to think it will be any better at working across Government, let alone across the economy, in solving these issues.

If the Government were serious about creating something new to join together the Home Office, the Department for Business and Trade, the DFE and everybody else, they would put it in the Treasury or perhaps the Cabinet Office. They would not just make it part of the DFE management structure. Worse than that is the loss of independence compared with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education.

There is legislation currently going through the other place that ostensibly creates Skills England, but it does no such thing. All it does is abolish the independent institute and move all of its powers into the Department for Education. The Secretary of State will now have responsibility for standards for T-levels. Imagine if that were the case for A-levels. If it is not all right for A-levels, why should it be all right for T-levels?

**Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD):** Will the right hon. Member give way?

**Damian Hinds:** If the hon. Member will forgive me, I will continue.

There is also no guarantee that business will continue to be involved in setting those standards. I am afraid that public and business confidence is set to be eroded—rightly, because everybody knows that the easiest way for the Government to increase the numbers of people doing anything in education is to erode standards to get more people through.

I believe the Sainsbury report was—and still is—a good blueprint. Of course, the Government are entitled to evolve it, but they should recognise that the principles remain sound. With T-levels, it was always going to be hard to get sufficient industry placements and to overcome powerful objections that we need to change the system rather than just add to it. With apprenticeships, there will always be, as there always have been, firms that try to game the system. We can argue about what the levy should or should not cover, but it is a good thing and it



needs to be designed and maintained to encourage a net increase in investment in this area and to deal with the free rider problem.

There will always be some cost and downside when the bar of minimum standards is raised, as we did. We need to remember where we started, with the need to increase productivity and have higher expectations for all in the interests of social justice. We need to maintain those minimum standards to keep apprenticeships and T-levels equivalent, with the same levels of knowledge, skills and behaviours.

Finally, the independence of the body that sets the standards, working with and for business, is key. The Government will obviously keep Skills England, but I ask the Minister to build into its design proper, full independence from her Department, and a proper, full guiding role for the businesses these occupations need to serve. I want Ministers not just to say that, but to write it into the legislation.

2.49 pm

**Sonia Kumar** (Dudley) (Lab): It is a pleasure and an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for securing this important debate on the pivotal role of apprenticeships and T-levels in our national industrial strategy.

As we face a significant skills gap, particularly in science, technology, engineering and maths fields, those pathways are critical for equipping our workforce with the expertise needed to drive innovation and economic growth. T-levels and apprenticeships bridge the gap between education and the workplace, combining classroom learning and practical experience. T-levels provide substantial industrial placements, while apprenticeships enable individuals to earn while they gain real-world skills. Together they address shortages in key sectors, such as manufacturing, construction, healthcare and beauty, ensuring that students are job ready from day one.

Dudley College of Technology in my constituency exemplifies excellence in this area. The college offers a wide range of T-levels across many disciplines, blending academic and practical learning. Its commitment to apprenticeships is equally impressive, with over 4,000 apprenticeships supported through strong partnerships with local businesses. Those collaborations ensure that training meets industry needs and contributes to regional economic growth.

The STEM sector remains the heart of the industrial strategy but continues to face persistent skills shortages. Apprenticeships and T-levels are vital to addressing those challenges and building a workforce equipped for careers in science, technology, engineering and maths. Institutions such as Dudley Tech play a key role in closing the gap, but we must focus on diversity in STEM. Women make up only 27% of STEM workers, but 52% of the country's wider workforce. Meanwhile, only 12% of STEM workers, compared with 19% in the wider workforce, come from ethnic minority backgrounds. We will not see improvement unless we address this matter head on and break down barriers to apprenticeships and T-levels.

Measures by the previous Government were ineffective, with females aged 16 to 29 making up only 29% of the STEM workforce—a mere 1% more than the generation

before them. Under-representation of women, minorities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds remains a barrier to unlocking the country's true economic and technological potential on the global stage. Making apprenticeships and T-levels more accessible will attract a broader range of talent, enriching the STEM workforce and fostering innovation.

In conclusion, we must make apprenticeships and T-levels more accessible to attract a broader range of talent, particularly in STEM, and further promote their uptake to diverse audiences. By fostering partnerships between educational institutions such as Dudley Tech and industry, we can create a more skilled environment for all.

2.52 pm

**Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for securing this debate on such a critical issue for our young people. Today, I want to highlight a major concern among college staff and students: the need for certainty about the potential defunding of BTECs in favour of T-levels.

For years, BTECs have served as a trusted form of level 3 qualification, providing students with practical and theoretical skills in a format that staff are experienced in delivering. I have heard from teachers about the pride and joy they take in teaching BTECs and watching their students thrive as they apply themselves to often very practical subjects. In many cases, it is the first time that those children have ever felt passionate about learning and excited to go further. It gives them the chance to finally start down the path—a path I imagine all of us in the Chamber want young people to take—towards realising their full potential. That is why so many are concerned about the replacement of BTECs with T-levels, and why I hope that the Government address those concerns when they publish the findings of their review of the policy next month.

I have heard from teachers who say they will struggle with the suggested rapid adoption of new course structures and unfamiliar theoretical components across the whole range of non-A-level subjects. Staff at South Thames Colleges Group, which serves many of my local students, have expressed concerns about how those sweeping changes will be implemented effectively. Currently, around 58 courses are at risk of being defunded.

**Melanie Onn:** Is some of the concern coming from colleges not also about the timing of those decisions? Franklin college in my constituency has said that the earlier it knows, the better it can plan. It is already receiving parents and young people in for open days for courses next year.

**Luke Taylor:** The hon. Lady makes a point so good that I will be getting to it shortly—I completely agree.

Staff worry about having to adapt their curricula to align with the new T-levels, which will involve updating course content, revising teaching methods and redesigning assessment strategies to meet the new required standards. There is no way to do that without enormous, time-consuming upheaval, which they will need as much notice as possible to prepare for. Teachers deserve a definitive answer on what will happen next.

[Luke Taylor]

It is not just teaching staff; students have been left in the dark, too. Approximately 380 students planning to enrol at a college in the South Thames Colleges Group are affected by the confusion surrounding the implementation of T-levels. Those currently completing GCSEs and planning for their post-16 education face uncertainty about what their courses will look like in September 2025. They fear the removal of the element of choice in the system.

BTECs formerly offered the option of a professional placement, but T-levels are geared specifically to placements. That leaves those who may not be academically suited to A-levels but do not wish to begin a T-level course, 20% of which is effectively a job, with no real support. On a visit to Carshalton college, I was told that there were 120 applicants for a diploma in childcare but only seven for a T-level in childcare. That could create a shortage in qualified staff coming through the system. The impact is felt disproportionately by those with special educational needs and disabilities, many of whom need extra support to explore their options before entering adult life, and for whom entry into the world of work may not be the right option so early in adulthood.

Nobody is denying the merit in reviewing periodically the way we train our young people for the future, but forcing students to choose exclusively between A-levels and T-levels could represent a narrowing of their options. I fear that this is a poorly managed top-down change for teachers to implement, and a gamble with the opportunities of a generation of young people who, let us not forget, have already had their education severely disrupted by the covid pandemic. With September 2025 rapidly approaching, I urge the Government to provide clarity to all those affected so both students and staff can plan for the change ahead. The Government must also think again, and give colleges and students flexibility to choose the appropriate qualifications for them and their communities.

2.57 pm

**Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

Making sure that our young people have access to a wide range of educational opportunities that can lead them on to high-quality, well-paid and secure employment is vital to the health of our economy. In fact, it is critical to towns like Mansfield, which are to some extent facing a brain drain due to poor investment in employment opportunities and a weak private sector. They also have the difficulties with productivity and gross value added highlighted by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds); those are a real challenge in constituencies like mine.

In July, I was elected with a mandate for change locally. I stood on a platform to focus on five local missions that I thought would have a significant impact. One was to do everything I could to facilitate a stable and growing local economy and good-quality jobs for everyone in my constituency. Of course, a critical part of that is ensuring that there is a wide range of high-calibre academic and vocational education opportunities. I therefore welcome the debate.

Without a highly skilled workforce, areas like mine cannot attract the investment we need, and we know that investment brings prosperity for our communities. I am delighted that the Government made additional money available in the Budget for further education and have announced reforms to the apprenticeship system, with a new growth and skills levy. I welcome the progress and know that the Government have aspirations to do more over the coming months and years. I want Mansfield to be part of that conversation.

I have had a number of discussions with West Notts college and Nottingham Trent University about their funding streams and ways they feel they can work together more effectively to bring exactly those types of opportunities in the further and higher education sector to young people and adults in my constituency. As part of that, we have seen a £6.5 million education investment from Nottingham Trent University in my constituency, which is delivering specialist teaching and learning facilities to support local people to upskill and to access and retain employment in the local area. That includes really important opportunities in nursing, aligned with the local health authority, and in engineering, business, criminal justice and sports science. I congratulate both those parties on their work to enabled all of that to come to fruition.

I see latent potential to build on that collaboration between HE and FE in my constituency, which might be called “the Mansfield model”, across further education. By cutting red tape and streamlining the effectiveness of funding, like in the West Notts college and Nottingham Trent University joint campus in my constituency, it would be possible to unleash the power of further education provision. Given the success in my local area, I recently wrote to invite the Secretary of State for Education to Mansfield. I would be delighted to host a Minister from the Department, so that they can see directly how the local model could be used as a blueprint to improve skills and attract important private sector investment into towns like mine.

3.1 pm

**Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the register of interests.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for securing this important debate. While I agree with him that much more needs to be done to encourage apprenticeships and technical education, when I think back to what I was deciding to do after secondary school, I envy the choices available to young people today. I left school in the era when, under Tony Blair's target, 50% of young people were expected to go to university. That is what I did, but it simply was not the right route for me. On-the-job training, with the promise of a full-time job at the end, is a fantastic way for many young people to kick-start their careers. I am pleased that the previous Government did so much to increase the opportunities available to young people, with 5.8 million apprenticeships created and the overwhelming majority of occupations now able to offer the apprenticeship route.

I am proud of the work taking place in my constituency of Broxbourne as part of that. Hertford Regional College offers a wide range of post-16 professional and technical programmes and apprenticeships, with nearly 3,000 young

people going on to these courses and getting the skills they need for their careers. At the end of their course, they are going on to full-time employment or further education at above the national average—we are very good at getting people into full-time employment after they go to the college. I am pleased that, from September 2025, free schools in the Brouxbourne constituency will offer T-level pathways, but there is still much more to do.

Too many students are embarking on low-quality university degree courses, with little prospect of finding good employment opportunities relating to their degree when they graduate. Industries from hospitality to the trades are rightly calling for greater flexibility in the delivery of apprenticeships and more freedom in how the apprenticeship levy can be spent, enabling more employers to offer better opportunities for young people. I want to see wider changes to the education system, so that it is much more geared towards preparing students for the world of work.

The Government claim to want economic growth, although their actions are not exactly matching their words at the moment. To achieve a faster-growing economy, we need to get more people into work and have a laser focus on developing the next generation of entrepreneurs. Young people need to know that there are routes other than university to success and full-time employment. I know that inspirational former apprentices are spreading the word to students across the country, but let us make it easier for them to make the case for apprenticeships. Let us make sure that every young person can choose the right path for them.

3.4 pm

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I commend the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for securing this debate. There are no ifs or buts about it; we just have to get further education right. I want to confine my remarks to three areas. First, we need more teachers. Secondly, we need more space. Thirdly, we need reform of both T-levels and apprenticeships.

We are running out of teachers in further education. Courses are closing, waiting lists are growing and colleges cannot pay enough to attract people from industry—the Association of Colleges calculates that there is an average pay gap of £9,000. Would the Minister consider presenting a medium-term plan to improve pay and conditions to get teachers into our class spaces? Furthermore, will she extend teacher workforce planning to further education, as the previous Education Committee advised?

Colleges do not have the space to train young people, so we need sustained capital funding in skills infrastructure. I feel blessed to have been able to visit the Poole campus of Bournemouth & Poole college, where so much more could be done to teach clean energy skills if there was investment in the right space. The college knows what space it wants to build the facilities in; it just does not have the sustained capital funding to make that happen. Will the Government appraise the needs of colleges and support them to access the spaces they need to provide apprenticeships and training in the skills that will fuel the growth of our economy, given that growth is our Government's No. 1 mission?

I look forward to the Government confirming what the qualifications landscape will look like for school leavers, following the very welcome commitment to pause and review Conservative plans to defund unpopular qualifications such as BTECs, which rival T-levels. T-level courses, particularly in education and childcare, may include a substantial work experience placement. That might be a good idea in principle—I have been very lucky to visit Bournemouth & Poole college and learn about its world-leading health T-level—but just over one in 10 construction and engineering T-level students could not complete the required work placement. Student numbers are lower than planned; drop-outs are high; announced courses have been cut or thrown into doubt before they started; courses have not been funded for young adults aged 19 to 24, when our country needs them to be educated and in training; and the Conservative Government, which this Labour Government replaced, botched the roll-out. Will the Government increase support to employers taking T-level students?

There are high hopes that the reformed growth and skills levy and the lifelong learning entitlement will give workers access to high-quality training in higher-demand sectors. I invite the Minister to visit Bournemouth & Poole college—particularly the Bournemouth campus—where we have 2,000 apprentices in training, and an outstanding achievement rate of 8.4% over the national average. Huge economic differences are being made to local employers such as Sunseeker, which, together with the college, has launched a training initiative to address a national skills shortage affecting the marine industry. Its Skills Academy provides fully paid 12-week intensive boatbuilding skills courses across five specialisms. Following training, students join colleagues at the shipyard to achieve a nationally recognised qualification over 12 months. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire asked whether we need Skills England. The example of Bournemouth & Poole college working with Sunseeker shows how an organisation can find and fill gaps at a national level, and co-ordinate the funding and frameworks to grow our economy.

Octopus Energy is ensuring that we create more than 4,000 skilled jobs, including qualified heat pump installers, by 2030 to help our Government to meet their clean energy by 2030 mission. With the launch of the first employer-provided low-carbon heating apprentice scheme, Octopus is demonstrating how employer providers can create high-quality apprentice programmes. We need to ensure that apprenticeship funding rules requirements and the accountability framework reflect the needs of employer providers, rather than focusing mostly on the needs of colleges and training providers. Will the Minister consider creating employer provider-specific funding rules in order to streamline the reporting responsibility? As part of the reform of Ofsted, which I welcome, will she support joint working between technical experts and Ofsted inspectors so that the inspectors better understand the technical requirements during inspections? That is particularly key for Octopus Energy's pioneering approach of developing skills driven by rapidly developing technology.

For years, the same thoughts have been swirling through my mind and the minds of many of my constituents, whose doors I have been knocking on over the past two years. It all comes down to this single question: why can Bournemouth and Britain not do better?



[Tom Hayes]

Why can we not have the things we are entitled to? Bad things are not inevitable; they are the result of political choices, such as those that have been made over the past 14 years. We want to make different choices in Bournemouth and in Britain. We want young people to get on and have decent, well-paying jobs that mean presents under the tree, a meal out with loved ones, a new home and a new car in the driveway, and a sense of purpose and mission in the careers they choose. I very much welcome the Minister coming to this debate, and I look forward to her response. I thank the right hon. Member for East Hampshire for calling this important debate. I really call for a turning of the page, because for too long, too many people have been held back.

**Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair):** Before I call Jim Shannon, I will just say that there are five people wishing to speak and 20 minutes, so you can do your own calculations.

3.10 pm

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I am not a great mathematician, but I know that that means four minutes. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on leading this debate. I know he undertook a lot of work on apprenticeships and T-levels in his time as Minister, and he did exceptionally well. He is in a different role now but he still shares his advice and experience.

We must do all we can to expand education and employment opportunities for young people across the United Kingdom. In every debate I give a Northern Ireland perspective and speak on the things we do well back home. The Department for the Economy has released its yearly statistics on the uptake of apprenticeships, and it is good news that there has been a rise. As of October '24, there were 1,756 people undertaking an apprenticeship in the electrotechnical field, 500 in health and social care, and 700 in plumbing, which the right hon. Member referred to in opening the debate. In addition, 10,500 were studying for a level 2 award and 3,700 for a level 3 award.

I have spoken before about the importance of apprenticeships and the role they play in teaching young people a unique skillset after leaving school. However, it is crucial that this is properly reflected in their pay. I know this is not the Minister's responsibility, but we have to ensure that apprenticeship pay encourages young people to stay on and finish their apprenticeships, as their colleagues and friends might be earning much more for stacking the shelves in Tesco or Asda. That is just one example. Apprenticeships are important, but young people need the time and money to get through them.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire has spoken before about ensuring parity of esteem between academic and vocational routes. There must be an understanding that the university route does not always appeal to young people, and an option to encourage them to get out into the world of work. I believe that the Minister is committed to that, so it would be interesting to get her thoughts.

From July to September 2024, there were some 513,000 unemployed people aged 18 to 24 in the UK, which is an unemployment rate of 13.7%. Unfortunately, that

is a rise on the 11.6% in the previous year. Again, apprenticeships are critical to that. Let us get young people into apprenticeships and reduce that unemployment rate.

I hear what the right hon. Member for East Hampshire said about T-levels. There is no doubt success with this option. In 2022, the first T-level results were announced. Out of 1,029, there was a 92.2% pass rate, which is excellent. As far as I am aware, the T-level system is for England and does not apply to the devolved nations, so it would be great to know what the Minister can do to exchange thoughts with the devolved Administrations and see how we can extend that success.

Apprenticeships are a fantastic way to earn while learning and they allow for people to be fast-tracked into the working world. Apprenticeships are available in numerous sectors across the UK. We must encourage young people to see them as an option after they choose to leave school. Many associate the word "apprenticeship" with male-dominant fields such as mechanics, engineering or plumbing, but there are endless opportunities out there in a large range of sectors for people of all ages and with all interests, man and woman. A lady can do a job equally as well as a man. That should never be discredited in any way.

Job creation is an important issue for the entirety of the UK. To get individuals into the job market, encouragement and prospects must be there from school age. We must do more to encourage young people to think about their careers and futures. More importantly, we must make them aware of the options for what they want to do when they leave school. I look to the Minister to see if engagement is possible on expanding T-level qualifications to Northern Ireland and Scotland. Will the Minister commit to undertaking future discussions on this with the Department for Education back home? Equal opportunities for all young people should apply across the whole of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

3.14 pm

**Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on securing this important debate.

Hartlepool is very lucky to be served by some outstanding providers, including Hartlepool College of Further Education, under the inspiring leadership of its principal Darren Hankey, Hartlepool Sixth Form College, where I was privileged to once chair the board of governors, and the Northern School of Art, with its international reputation. Diminished funding and demographic pressures have too often resulted in providers being in competition rather than collaboration. My first point to the Minister is that we must create an environment where providers in towns such as ours can collaborate effectively to deliver for young people.

On the 2017 reforms that were mentioned by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire, part of the issue is that the levy, and its spend-it-or-lose-it mentality, meant that there was often a rush to spend it, rather than thought being given to proper workforce development. Indeed, £700 million ended up being top-sliced by the Treasury. The Association of Employment and Learning Providers said that this was money raised for skills but

not being spent on skills. I welcome the new growth and skills levy and its greater flexibility, because the money it raises has to go into developing the skills of our young people, and too often in the past it did not.

We have to think about the parity of esteem. In principle, with T-levels I genuinely support the idea of creating that parity of esteem. The problem in places such as Hartlepool, which has already been referenced and acknowledged, is that we do not currently have the economy and the industrial placements to effectively support them. In the words of the principal of Hartlepool College of Further Education, the 2017 reforms and the rush to T-levels taken together have actually resulted in fewer opportunities for younger people in constituencies like mine. Unfortunately, Hartlepool has one of the highest levels of those not in education, employment or training in the country.

Another point has to be raised, but it is a difficult one. While I absolutely understand the principle of the functional skills element in those qualifications, there is a genuine concern in industry that the element is acting as a blocker to some of our young people's accessing the skills, training and careers that they would like to have, because they feel unable to get past that barrier. I ask the Minister to give that some consideration.

In the round, we have to think about the agenda from an immigration perspective. I marvel at the fact that the FE college in my constituency, which has seen a 10% cut in funding, trains bricklayers, and yet we are importing bricklayers from abroad. I have a constituency with one of the highest levels of unemployment in the country. It is not hard to square that circle. Let us train our own and fund our skills properly, so that we do not have to rely on immigration from abroad.

The right hon. Member for East Hampshire made the point extremely well that in this country we have been obsessed with supply-side reform for far too long, with the numerous different qualifications and the constant changing of what offer there is. We have to move to a demand-side approach. If we get industry and jobs into places such as Hartlepool to drive the industrial growth that we want to see, the skills will follow. That is the change that we have to see, and I would like to see it delivered in constituencies like mine.

3.18 pm

**Mr Peter Bedford** (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am immensely proud of my upbringing in a modest town in Northamptonshire. I grew up in a single-parent family with my mother, and she instilled in me the work ethic and morals to learn more, to find out more about the community, and to get a trade or skill—to give me the aspiration to succeed. That is what really interests me in this debate. I believe that apprenticeships, technical training and on-the-job training does instil the aspiration in individuals to better themselves, their community and their families. That is why I am so interested in this debate.

From personal experience, working from an early age brings countless benefits. It is a disgrace that Governments have allowed NEETs to increase to the current level. How can it be right that we have 900,000 people aged between 16 and 24 not in education, employment or training? We are watching the next generation not pursuing their next step in life, which is to aspire to something better for themselves and their families.

The default answer from Governments over the last 20 years has been to funnel young people through higher education. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) mentioned the arbitrary targets, such as that set by the Blair Government to get 50% of school leavers to go to university. But there is another option: apprenticeships and on-the-job training. I am immensely proud of the success of the Conservative Government, who delivered 5.8 million apprenticeships across the country. Those apprenticeships offered young people opportunities for employment. Indeed, 70% of those young people were placed in occupations after training. I also agree wholeheartedly with our manifesto commitment to create 100,000 extra highly skilled apprentices every year over the next Parliament.

However, what has gone wrong? While there have been many achievements, it is disappointing that there has been stagnation in that area over the past few years. The challenges that have been outlined in concerns about the Budget will, sadly, not help the situation.

I have had representations from bodies such as EngineeringUK and Multiverse, explaining that the crux of the issue lies with the apprenticeship levy. The standards involved in setting up apprenticeships are far too cumbersome, and the funds from the levy are being redirected from employers to classroom training and assessments. It is no wonder that those bodies are moving away from that type of scheme towards academy-based training in-house, in their own companies and organisations.

What should we be doing instead? Much concern has recently been expressed, particularly by Opposition Members, about changes to national insurance contributions. I do not see those changes helping the situation. I believe we should be encouraging employers to take on more employees, including by the apprenticeship route, so that when they finish their apprenticeships they can stay within those organisations. Recently in my constituency, a number of small and medium-sized employers expressed to me concerns about the changes in employers' national insurance contributions, saying that they would incur thousands of pounds in extra costs. They will have to consider that sort of thing when they look at their forward planning and recruitment.

**Tom Hayes:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Mr Bedford:** No; I have limited time. I urge the Government to reconsider the proposals.

Finally, I think the tone needs to change from the top. Over many years, there has been a perception, at least, that apprenticeships and technical training have not been on a par with university education or other academic routes. I went through the academic route and my brother went through the apprenticeship, work-based training route. He is now earning far more money than I am. He left school without any qualifications, but he went to night school, trained himself, got an apprenticeship and went through the right route. He learned a skill and is now very successful.

In conclusion, I hope the Government take on board the arguments I have put forward.

3.22 pm

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, in an incredibly important debate about the future of our young people. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on his tenacity on the issue. I remember his time as Secretary of State for Education in the Government of Mrs May, and he had a genuine passion for the issue. To see him still banging the drum many years later is testament to his character.

I agree with a lot of what the right hon. Gentleman has said over the many years that he has been talking about the importance of technical education—that is, about the need to understand that technical education is not the younger sister of A-levels and academic qualifications. It is not the less important member of the family of opportunities presented to young people.

I declare an interest. I am the governor of a sixth-form college in my constituency, which provides T-levels—one of the outstanding providers in the west midlands. I also have a daughter who will soon be thinking about GCSE options for next year, so where she goes and what she does is very much on my mind.

As the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) said, it is incumbent on us all to say to young people who are looking at their options that whatever they choose to do, the routes available will help them to be the best they can be—whether through A-levels, T-levels or the remaining applied general qualifications, once the pause and review process is finished. We sometimes find ourselves in a false dichotomy of talking about academic studies on one side and vocational and technical studies on the other. Actually, we present a breadth of opportunity to our young people, in a simplified and accessible way, which will be the determination of whether they are successful or not.

I have two colleges in my constituency—City of Stoke-on-Trent sixth-form college and Stoke-on-Trent college. Under the leadership of Mark Kent and now Lesley Morrey, City of Stoke-on-Trent sixth-form college provides region-leading qualifications, including T-levels, BTECs and A-levels. Under the former leadership of Lisa Kapper, and now interim principal Antoinette Lythgoe, Stoke-on-Trent college demonstrates what can be done at all levels of potential learning.

A city like Stoke-on-Trent—not that dissimilar to the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash)—is a city that has challenges. The opportunity provided to young people at FE can be the greatest social mobility driver there is—it can unlock their potential—but there is a challenge in making sure that they are on the right path.

T-levels have been excellent for my city—again, I commend the right hon. Member for East Hampshire on the programme that he brought in when he was Education Secretary. That is about not only the uplift in funding for each young person, which better reflects the necessity of the work from the excellent staff, but the capital funding available for those institutions in the first wave to take T-levels up, which has allowed us to expand our college to create new and incredible facilities that mean that the learning experience for those young people is brilliant.

I believe that the Government are right to continue looking at this breadth, but I would say to the Minister—I have written to her noble Friend in the other place, Baroness Smith of Malvern, about this—that, while the pause and review is doing a job of work in looking at what BTECs are available, the colleges in my constituency are now trying to plan what they can offer in September 2025, much as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn). They do not currently know what they can offer. They have been asked to submit their projected T-level enrolment numbers now, but they do not know whether they will be offering an equivalent BTEC for the same course. Therefore, they are having to either overinflate their numbers and worry about in-year clawback, or worry about lack of lagged funding for the AGQ. I would urge the Minister to take that back to the Department.

In the remaining time that I have left, I will say that, while this debate has been excellent for talking about young people, there is a conversation that we have to have as a nation about adult education and ensuring that people in places such as Hartlepool and Stoke-on-Trent having to change careers because of changes in the way that industries work have the same opportunities as others to retrain, get new skills, get those well-paid, secure and hopefully unionised jobs that come with that, and make a meaningful contribution to where they live and to our country.

3.26 pm

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this afternoon, Sir Christopher. I also pay tribute to the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), whose speech was really interesting. I also praise him for his tenacity, expertise and seriousness on this subject.

I will restrict my remarks to the issues of T-levels and apprenticeships in tourism and agriculture, which are two huge employers in my constituency and around the rest of Cumbria—some 60,000 people in Cumbria work in tourism and there are 1,500 farms in my constituency alone. Those are hugely connected, without a doubt. For example, something like 20 million people visit the lakes every year, and we know that many of them come because of the beauty of the landscape, which is maintained by our farmers.

In terms of our workforce, 80% of the entire working-age population living in the Lake district already work in hospitality and tourism. Therefore, if we do not do something to bring people in, to create more affordable homes, to build our workforce, or, specifically, to train and retrain our young people so that we do not carry on losing over a third of them every single generation, we are in serious trouble.

When it comes to T levels, there is no doubt whatever that employers in the tourism economy of Cumbria strongly believe, as I do, that T-levels are an important potential source for boosting the pipeline of skilled workers, and that offering level 3 qualifications will enhance young people's employability and enable progression to higher education, linking, for example, with the University of Cumbria's excellent graduate apprenticeship programme.

Those employers recognise, and strongly believe, that the previous Government delayed and took too long to introduce the T-level in catering, and are pressuring this



Government on that. I met Baroness Smith of Malvern just last week to raise that point directly with her, and I ask the Minister to look at this issue again. Please will she consult employers within Cumbria to make sure that the T-level in catering, and other equivalent level 3 and level 4 qualifications, is made available so that we can qualify our children for this important area of work? Some 85% of employers who host T-level students—when that is available—report improved access to skilled talent, so I ask the Minister to take this seriously.

I will quickly switch over to apprenticeships in the agricultural sector. The total number of apprenticeship starts in agriculture in Cumbria for the year before last—the last year that we have data for—was 140. Only 70 were completed and no higher-level apprenticeships, at level 4 and above, were accomplished. We have 1,500 farms; that is far too few people coming forward as potential entrants. We have had all the discussions this week about succession, which is so very important, but the decline in new farm entrants threatens the sector's long-term viability.

The future of the farming sector is also exacerbated by the loss of educational infrastructure. The previous Government failed to intervene to save Cumbria's agricultural college, Newton Rigg, and although Kendal college and other FE and HE institutions around the county are doing their best to fill the gap, we still seriously feel that loss.

The UK provides 55% of its own food. Apprenticeships and succession in farming are crucial to our food security. The agricultural policies of this Government and the previous one have disincentivised farming production, which is fateful and foolish. This week we have seen the complaints, quite rightly, about the inheritance tax changes, which will lead to more farmland moving into ownership of equity and large corporations, and not being used for food production. Our failure to grow the workforce is also enormously significant.

I ask the Minister to look closely at higher-level apprenticeships in agriculture, to address the gap in advanced agricultural training at level 4 and above, and to develop leadership skills among future farmers to sustain the sector and the rural economy as a whole. Will she also introduce agricultural degree apprenticeships, in partnership with the University of Cumbria and local colleges, to create a pipeline for agricultural leadership? I will leave it there at four minutes.

3.30 pm

**Ian Sollom** (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, and the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for introducing it. I am sure we all agree that we owe it to our young people to ensure that they have access to all education and training options, and that those options are of the very highest standard. That is not always the case in the present system, which is having an impact not just on young people and their futures, but, as has been said, on the country's economic development and prospects.

Apprenticeships, vocational education and skills are all vital if the Government are serious about their growth mission and breaking down barriers to opportunity. I think we all share those ambitions, but the system needs reform across the board, starting right at the

beginning by ensuring that all young people are fully aware and informed of all their options—many thousands, as it may be—post 16 and post 18. We need to see an improvement in the quality of careers education, information, advice and guidance in schools to support them making those decisions.

**Clive Jones:** Many residents in my constituency of Wokingham are concerned about the uncertainty around T-level courses and other existing level 3 qualifications. Students in Wokingham have been looking at courses and colleges to apply to, and some colleges are currently unable to confirm existing level 3 courses. Does my hon. Friend agree that the current lack of clarity about the implementation of T-level courses is causing unnecessary stress to parents, students and teachers?

**Ian Sollom:** I absolutely agree, and I will come back to that point later.

The services that inform and offer guidance need to be informed themselves about the local and national job market, which industries and sectors are growing, and which skills are in demand in order to support students into top-quality jobs. We know that there are skills shortages, and giving higher-quality, useful information will be essential to plugging that skills gap.

On apprenticeships, the Lib Dems recognise that we not only need more apprenticeships, but that they need to be more attractive to young people. Guaranteeing that an apprenticeship pays at least the national minimum wage would be a good place to start. The Chancellor announced a welcome increase in the apprenticeship wage in the Budget last month, but even after those changes, that amount is still only just over 60% of the national living wage. That is quite a disincentive for young people to take up an apprenticeship.

We have also heard today that the apprenticeship levy is not working as well as it should, and that employers often cannot get the funding they need to train staff. In 2023-24, the levy raised £3.9 billion for the Treasury, but the apprenticeship budget, which is separate, awarded only £2.7 billion. Although £500 million goes to the devolved nations under the Barnett formula, as it should, that still leaves a shortfall of £700 million, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash). That money has been paid in through the levy, and therefore to the Treasury, but does not reach employers; as was said, it is raised for skills but not spent on skills. That is at a time when the Government say they are keen to encourage businesses to invest in skills. We need that to be directed to skills.

Furthermore, the system was designed so that levy payers do not spend all their levy funds and so that small businesses can access the levy to fund apprenticeships. That said, 98% of the apprenticeship budget was spent each year for the past three years, and if large employers spend all their levy funds, there would be no apprenticeship funding remaining for small businesses. We know that small businesses are crucial to the apprentice system. Non-levy-paying employers recruit more apprentices each year than levy-paying businesses: last year, that was 42,000 apprentices under 19 compared with 35,000 by larger recruiters—a difference of 7,000. We are waiting for more details on the Government's new growth and skills levy, but if they are serious about pivoting the apprenticeship system towards young people, they need to sort out apprenticeship funding.

[Ian Sollom]

On T-levels, the Liberal Democrats welcome the ambition to achieve equal value between academic and vocational routes—that has been a common theme across many parties for a considerable time—but we do not agree with the previous Government's decision simply to scrap dozens of BTEC courses. Those qualifications are a middle pathway that allows many students, including those who find the T-level entry requirements simply too high, to benefit from a combination of academic and applied qualifications. Research indicates that BTECs significantly improve university entry rates for both white working-class and black students.

Many parts of industry are concerned about T-levels. For example, the hospitality sector prides itself on having no barriers to entry to those with no industry experience, and opens its doors to people with low educational attainment. That encourages a more diverse, inclusive and accessible workforce. However, the hospitality T-level requires 16 to 18-year-olds to have 5 GCSEs of grade 5 and above. That excludes a whole host of young people with many non-academic skills and talents, who could make successful careers in hospitality. It is important that we keep BTEC routes for those people.

As other Members have mentioned, there have been problems with the roll-out of T-levels, and concerns have been expressed by education providers and employers about their ability to deliver industry placements. A report by the Education Policy Institute this year highlighted issues with student retention, with nearly a third of first-year health and science T-level students dropping out of their programme. Until the new T-levels are well established, understood by students and employers, and proven to be successful, rolling back BTECs, which are successful, would be a huge mistake. The Government's decision earlier in the year to review the defunding of BTECs was welcome. Now, however, as my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) pointed out, the delay in the outcome of that review is affecting planning for the next academic year and the opportunities available to young people. So, I urge the Government to get on and publish the outcome of that review.

Finally, with a lot of issues around skills at the moment, it seems that the answer is “Skills England”. I will echo the words of the right hon. Member for East Hampshire in his opening remarks that the King's Speech referred to a Skills England Bill, whereas the Bill that is in the other place does not refer to Skills England at all. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss Skills England when we consider the actual legislation.

3.40 pm

**Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on securing this super-important debate. All Westminster Hall debates are equal, but some are more equal than others, and when I saw the title of this debate and that it was being led by my right hon. Friend, I knew that it would be a good one.

I have not been disappointed at all, nor have I been disappointed by the excellent speeches by the hon. Members for Dudley (Sonia Kumar), for Sutton and

Cheam (Luke Taylor), and for Mansfield (Steve Yemm); by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) and by the hon. Members for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) and for Hartlepool (Mr Brash); by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) and by the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), and for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom). There was also a rare appearance in Westminster Hall by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), which I am sure we all savour. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] More indeed.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire did a superb job in giving us the fruit of his many years of experience and his multiple periods of service in public life, including two stints in the Department for Education, regarding this issue. He talked about the alphabet soup of organisations and qualifying bodies, the traineeships, the apprenticeships, the modern apprenticeships, the City & Guilds, the GNVQs, the NVQs, the Skills for Life, the diplomas, the BTECs and now the T-levels. The question now is this: will T-levels just be another element added to this alphabet soup, or will we actually realise the vision of what we have called the Sainsbury routes and rationalise the system? My right hon. Friend asked big questions about where the Government are going with traineeships, the apprenticeship levy and Skills England, and it will not surprise him that I will pick up on those questions.

I have several questions for the Minister. First, do the Government have a forecast for the number of apprenticeships that will start over the course of this Parliament? Such a forecast has certainly existed in the past; I saw one when I was in government. Do the Government have such a forecast? If so, will they publish it? What is the forecast number of apprenticeships that will start over the course of this Parliament? I ask that question because unless we know that baseline, we cannot ask sensible questions such as “What will be the impact of the growth and skills levy on the number of apprenticeships?” Without the baseline we cannot have a debate about the trade-off between one desirable thing, which is more flexibility for businesses, and another desirable thing, which is more apprenticeships.

Is it still the Government's policy to allow 50% of levy funds, rather than a specific number, to be spent on non-apprenticeships, or will it be perhaps another percentage now? What is the impact of the national insurance increase, first, on the number of apprenticeships—that is why we want to know the baseline number of apprenticeships—and, secondly, on the FE sector more generally? The national insurance increase is focused laser-like on lower-income workers, which particularly hits apprentices and people in the FE sector, so there is every reason to think that it will be particularly impactful for those two groups. Will the FE sector be fully compensated for the national insurance increase, or not?

I echo some of the excellent questions that the hon. Member for Bournemouth East asked about college funding. As the Minister knows, colleges are now classified as part of the public sector, but unlike other parts of the public sector they are not exempt from paying VAT. Is it the Government's intention to change that situation or not?

The other day, Baroness Smith of Malvern said that college staff were “rightly” disappointed that they were not given the same pay increase as schoolteachers. She implied that the Government would seek to close that historic gap; it has existed for many decades. I am not asking for miracles from the Government; this is a very long-standing challenge that everyone says is a problem. It has become slightly worse in the first pay round under this Government; the gap has grown a bit more. Is it the Government’s long-term aspiration to close that gap between sixth-form college teachers and teachers in schools? I am interested in whether that is the direction of travel.

Will the Minister also answer some structural questions? The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill is obviously going through the Lords at the moment. We have already raised the question about Skills England and—as the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire said—the powers are being taken not into a new independent body but directly into the Department. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said, it would be pretty extraordinary if the Ministers set their own standards for A-levels, so why do we think it would be okay in technical education? What is the Government’s game plan after the IfATE Bill? What is the plan to restore independent standards setting, rather than having it in what is only an agency of the Department?

I also want to ask a really specific question. This is a genuine question because I do not understand the decision. Why did the Department refuse to share the terms of reference for the short review of 16 to 19 qualifications with the wider world? I know that FE Week certainly put in a freedom of information request to get it, which is a pretty extraordinary thing to have to do. Normally, when there is a review, the terms of reference are published. That review is not a secret. We know what the Government are looking at—a known question about BTECs and what will happen. Why did the Government not publish it and will they now?

On one last structural question, my sympathies are entirely with the Minister and the Government as there is a big question here, and this is not a straightforward challenge. We have heard the case for BTECs from various Members—the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam made a passionate case in favour of them. I should declare an interest as I worked on T-levels before they were called T-levels, when they were still called the Sainsbury routes. Lord Sainsbury, Gordon Brown, Nick Boles and others did a huge amount of work to bring them to that point in trying to rationalise this alphabet soup. T-levels are our best hope: they are a more demanding qualification, they have a higher level of funding and they use a lot more time in industry. They are a better qualification that is bringing parity of esteem and higher quality to the FE sector, and they are our big chance to rationalise this issue that everyone agrees is a problem. How far will the Government go towards replacing some of the existing qualifications, and what is their overall strategy and vision for how this will pan out?

3.47 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** It is a privilege to speak with you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on securing

this important debate, and I thank him for sharing his wide and comprehensive knowledge of past and present qualifications and awards. I am also grateful for the challenge that he and many other Members have brought to this debate. This Government are ambitious for young people, and we are excited and optimistic about what can be achieved.

As Members have rightly stated and spoken about, apprenticeships, BTECs and T-levels can offer incredible opportunities for young people. We have heard from many Members about the superb colleges and students in their constituencies, such as the hon. Members for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) and for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor), as well as my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and for Dudley (Sonia Kumar). My hon. Friends the Members for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) and for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) both mentioned an invite to their respective colleges, and of course I will pass those on to my noble Friend the Minister for Skills.

**Gareth Snell:** Will the Minister also take back an invitation to Stoke-on-Trent to our noble Friend?

**Janet Daby:** Very smart and clever indeed—I will of course pass on that invitation to Stoke-on-Trent as well. We have also heard from the hon. Members for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford)—it was great to hear about his brother’s achievements, so I thank him for that. There were contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), the hon. Members for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom) and for Wokingham (Clive Jones), and the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O’Brien).

Members have spoken about many issues in this debate, such as greater diversity in the workforce, including both women in STEM and the representation of people from diverse backgrounds. Concerns have also been raised about BTECs, apprenticeships and T-levels—for example, the apprenticeship levy, the teaching of further education, the reform of qualifications, and colleges needing certainty in the future about specific courses. I hope to address as many of those and other remarks as time allows, including the points raised by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire.

It is this Government’s mission to drive and increase opportunity for young people across the country. Working with Skills England, it is also this Government’s mission to support employers to train people up and identify and develop the skills they need to grow, helping to kick-start economic growth. Early investment in young people pays off for employers. We want young people to be enthusiastic, energised and passionate about learning and developing in their work. That will benefit employers, industry and our wider economy, which will be galvanised by a new generation who are willing to work hard and progress in their careers.

It has been concerning in recent years that young people have seen their apprenticeship opportunities disappear. We ask ourselves, “Why is that?” It may be helpful to remind the shadow Minister that following apprenticeship reforms made by the previous Government, including the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in 2017, apprenticeship starts by young people under 25 fell



[Janet Daby]

by almost 40% according to the Department for Education's published data. It is also concerning that so many workers and employers have told us that they find it difficult to access the skills they need. UK employers report that more than a third of UK vacancies in 2022 were due to skill shortages. That is what we have inherited.

According to a stark statement from the OECD, 26% of the UK workforce are underqualified for their job, compared with an OECD average of 18%. There are widespread skills shortages in areas such as construction, manufacturing and health and social care. We desperately need workers in those areas. That is why meeting the skills needs of the next decade is central to delivering our Government's five missions, which, I remind everybody, are economic growth, opportunity for all, a stronger NHS, safer streets and clean energy.

This Government will create a clear, flexible, high-quality skills system with a culture of businesses valuing and investing in training that supports people of all ages and backgrounds, breaking down the barriers to opportunity and driving economic growth. We are bringing forward legislation to enable Skills England to work with key stakeholders. Skills England will make sure that we know where our skills gaps are to ensure that a comprehensive suite of apprenticeships, training and technical qualifications is aligned with those skills gaps and the needs of employers.

I have heard concerns that Skills England will not have the independence or authority it needs. I would like to dispel those concerns today: Skills England will have an independent board that will provide leadership and direction, as well as scrutiny to ensure that it operates effectively and within the agreed framework,

Growth and skills are essential. We have listened to employers, who have told us that the current apprenticeship system does not work. We must do more to support them in accessing the training they need to fill their skills gaps and spread opportunity. Our growth and skills offer will provide employers and learners with greater flexibility and choice and create routes into good, skilled jobs in growing industries aligned with our industrial strategy.

**Neil O'Brien:** Will the Minister give way?

**Janet Daby:** I am going to make progress, and then I will take some interventions if I can.

We are introducing new shorter-duration apprenticeships and foundation apprenticeships as a first key step towards greater flexibility that will benefit employers and, indeed, students. We recognise that some roles need less than 12 months' training and employers are currently locked out of offering apprenticeships. We want to support sectors that make use of fixed-term contracts or have seasonal demands or specific recruitment timetables. We will engage with employers via Skills England and introduce that flexibility where the justification is clear. Our new work-based foundation apprenticeship will focus on ensuring that training is directed towards real vacancies. It will offer young people broad training with clear and seamless progression into other apprenticeships. Unlike the last Government, we will work closely with employers and providers. This Government will make sure we get it right.

**Neil O'Brien:** The Minister talked about introducing flexibility where appropriate—it sounded like perhaps only in some sectors. Is it still the intention for all employers to be able to use 50% of their apprenticeship levy for things that are not apprenticeships?

**Janet Daby:** The area the shadow Minister mentioned is currently being reviewed. As that information comes out, I am sure we will make him aware of it.

To open up the growth and skills offer and to deliver opportunity where it is most needed, we will ask more employers to step forward and fund level 7 apprenticeships themselves, outside the apprenticeship budget. Of the 2.5 million workers in critical demand occupations, the vast majority—more than 80%—require qualifications lower than degree level, so it feels right that we focus our support on those at the start of their working lives, rather than those already towards the top of the ladder.

The Government believe that all young people should have access to high-quality training that meets their needs and provides them with opportunities to thrive. That is why we are committed to making a success of T-levels and extending the opportunity they provide to as many young people as possible. We have introduced three new T-levels this year, opening up more opportunity for young people in the areas of craft and design, media, broadcast and production, and animal care. It was great to see an overall pass rate this year of nearly 90% and to learn that 83% of T-level students who applied to higher education secured a place.

At the end of the last academic year, more than 30,000 young people had taken a T-level, and we want to ensure that many more have the opportunity to study them, but we know that some changes are needed if we want to make that a reality. That is why we are looking at the delivery of current T-levels to ensure that more young people are able to enrol and succeed in them. Our review of post-16 qualifications reforms will ensure that there is a range of high-quality qualifications at level 3, alongside T-levels and A-levels, to support the skills needs of employers and the needs of learners.

**Neil O'Brien:** Will the Government agree to publish the terms of reference of that review?

**Janet Daby:** I have heard the shadow Minister mention that already, and I believe he has already received a response. [Interruption.] No, the shadow Minister has already received a response.

**Neil O'Brien:** Is that a yes? Will the Minister—

**Janet Daby:** I am sorry—I have already answered.

Last month's Budget saw a good settlement for further education and skills, including £300 million revenue funding for further education and £300 million capital investment to support colleges to maintain, improve and secure the suitability of their estates.

Each one of us here knows the importance of high-quality skills training for young people, and I am grateful for the considered contributions of everyone who has spoken. When we look at the statistics, it is clear that for too long, young people have been locked out of the opportunities that can benefit them most. The actions I have outlined today will give us a real sense of how to make a difference for learners and employers. That is at

the heart of the Government's mission to spread opportunity and drive economic growth across all parts of our country.

3.59 pm

**Damian Hinds:** It has been a good debate. I thank everyone who took part for bringing their own perspectives. There is just one thing I want to say. We cannot legislate for parity of esteem; we can only earn it. High-quality apprenticeships and T-levels can do that, because young people know that the standards have been set by employers, and they are right for the levels necessary for success in those sectors. Crucially, to have confidence in the integrity of qualifications, they need to be set independently and, in the case of these qualifications, they need to be set with business. The Minister has an opportunity with a Bill going through Parliament at the moment. When the IfATE transfer of powers Bill comes to Committee stage in the Commons, please will the Government table an amendment to write that independence and the involvement of business into law?

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered apprenticeships and T Levels.

## Government and Democracy Education

4 pm

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered government and democracy education in schools.

It is appropriate that I have secured this debate during Parliament Week. I want to put on record my praise for the education and engagement team for their brilliant work. Unsurprisingly, I am going to argue that there should be more education about government and democracy in our schools. I am not the first to make that case and I will not be the last, but of course it would be great if I were.

Making this case fits into the category of not needing to be a rocket scientist—namely, it is obvious that for a democracy to function well its citizens must understand how their government and democratic system works. As with many things, though, just being obvious is not enough to ensure that it happens.

Why is this important? The House of Lords Select Committee on Citizenship and Civic Engagement put it well in a report in 2018:

“By underpinning democratic engagement and reinforcing the effective working of civil society, active citizenship contributes to a healthy and functioning society.”

In my view, we should teach about government and democracy for the same reason that we teach other subjects: to equip our young people with the skills, knowledge and attributes that will enable them to be the architects of their future, and not merely inhabitants of a future designed by others.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for holding this important debate on a subject that I agree with wholeheartedly. Ahead of COP29, I held a student conference of the parties with three high schools in my constituency, where the students passionately debated climate issues. Does my hon. Friend agree that initiatives like that underscore how integrating government and democracy education into the school curriculum can empower young people to become informed, active citizens who are engaged with the challenges we are facing?

**John Slinger:** I agree. I will come to that when I complete my remarks. We are talking about empowering our young people to set the agenda in their schools and, we hope, in their lives.

Learning standard subjects, such as history and science, enables young people to develop core skills, imbibe relevant knowledge and hone the powers of critical analysis that will empower them to thrive in future, whether in study or work.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. I agree that it is important for young people to have an understanding of democracy at an early stage, especially in schools. My youngest staff member studied government and politics. There were 28 students in their class in the first year, but that went down to 11 in the second year. They then did a further course comprising 14 students, which included only two girls. Does the hon. Member agree that there is a disconnect between young people and the political system that needs to be addressed, possibly as a mandatory module through learning for life and work?

**John Slinger:** I agree that we need to embed this learning in our system in a far more concrete fashion.

To truly empower young people we must go further than merely teach standard subjects. We must ensure that they both understand and value our government and democratic system. For example, young people draw on their knowledge of standard subjects at work, but an enhanced understanding of government and democracy would make them aware of how the economy, and hence their job, is affected by the decisions that politicians take in this House.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous with his time. He will know that one of the most successful areas of the economy and politics in this country is co-operatives and mutuals, but it may also be the case that within the wider subject, it is the area about which knowledge is lowest. The Co-operative party and the co-operative movement are keen to see co-operatives as part of young people's political and economic education. Does he agree that that could help young people to meet their potential to learn about different models of ownership and of democracy that can help our communities thrive?

**John Slinger:** I should state that I am a proud member of the Co-operative party. Indeed, should more learning about our democratic system take place, I would hope that it would include more information about the co-operative movement and the co-operative models that I believe will help us to build a better Britain.

To add practical experience of our democratic system would be a catalyst for increasing the agency of our young people. In its submission to the Government's ongoing curriculum review, the Association for Citizenship Teaching sets that out clearly:

"Citizenship education fosters critical competencies, such as information evaluation, deliberation, advocacy, and oracy, which are vital for civic engagement."

**Claire Hazelgrove** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): I declare a deep interest: I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group on political and media literacy, and I believe these issues are very important. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not just about the education of young people in and of itself, but about how people go on to engage in our democracy later in life, and that that is about not just voting but engaging with confidence and clarity with elected representatives? For example, as a new Member of Parliament, I have reflected on the fact that a number of residents say to me, "I'm not sure who to go to—is it you, a councillor or somebody else?" Would enhancing political and democratic education not serve to enhance our entire political system, ensuring that people get the support they need, from the person they need it from, when they need it—and that they do so with confidence?

**John Slinger:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. It is a point I had to excise from my speech because I did not think I had the time, but it is very important. As new Members, constituents often bring issues to our attention that would be better dealt with by a councillor or another arm of the state, so it is an important part of the process that we clarify, educate and inform better than we are doing at the moment.

I will complete the quote from the Association for Citizenship Teaching, which goes on to say:

"Re-prioritising this subject in the upcoming review is vital, as it contributes directly to the health of national democracy and the wellbeing of citizens."

We have a long way to go. Electoral Commission data shows a lack of democratic engagement and understanding among younger audiences, and at a time when the Labour party has pledged to introduce voting at the age of 16, only 16% of 16 and 17-year-olds are on the electoral register and 19% of 16 to 24-year-olds are not confident that they know how to register to vote. Some statistics from the commission are staggeringly worrying: 39% of 16 to 24-year-olds say that they are not interested in politics, and 33% say they do not know very much or anything about politics in the UK.

**Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): Those who measure trust in politics tell us, as we regrettably know, that that trust is at its lowest point in over 40 years. Part of rebuilding that trust is very much about engaging with the curriculum and ensuring that people know who we are, what we do, what the media who report on us so much do and how those institutions work. Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that the current curriculum and assessment review is a fantastic opportunity to ensure that steps to improve political literacy are built into our future education system?

**John Slinger:** I will come to that point, because I think that the review is a golden opportunity.

The commission confirmed what I and others here know: too many young people do not understand how to participate in our democratic processes, and their lack of motivation is due to a lack of knowledge about parties and candidates. If we want young people to engage more in elections, for their sake and ours, we must work harder to ensure they understand and value our democracy.

**Marie Goldman** (Chelmsford) (LD): The hon. Gentleman pointed out that this is UK Parliament Week. Last week, I was delighted to visit Great Baddow high school in my constituency to speak to students who were preparing for a debate that they would be taking part in as part of UK Parliament Week. They asked me lots of wonderful questions on diverse subjects. I have often been into local schools to talk about government, but it often becomes apparent that students do not know anything at all about local government, and yet local government affects their lives on a day-to-day basis—sometimes much more than this place. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that local government, alongside central Government, should form part of this education?

**John Slinger:** I wholeheartedly agree. It is critical that we educate our young people about the different tiers of government and the responsibilities of elected representatives within them.

I will touch briefly on the history of citizenship in our education system. Since 2002, citizenship has been a statutory foundation national curriculum subject at key stages 3 and 4. Luke Brown, a teacher at Lawrence Sheriff school in Rugby, told me:

"A big concern is the increasingly limited time given to Citizenship and, therefore, politics."



Citizenship remains a non-statutory programme of study at key stages 1 and 2—or primary, to use the old parlance—where, as teachers tell me, a similar situation ensues, and other priorities all too often drown out citizenship. According to the 2018 Lords report, citizenship peaked between 2009 and 2011, and declined particularly under the last Government’s curriculum review in 2013. The report found that

“citizenship was never fully embedded into the education system”.

The same happened with other subjects that were, in my view, wrongly regarded by the previous Government as subsidiary. The English baccalaureate, introduced in 2010, did not include citizenship. Furthermore, there has been a substantial decline in the number of students studying the citizenship GCSE and the number of specialist teachers.

With our new Government’s curriculum review, we have a golden opportunity to put that right. Like all MPs, I make a big effort to visit as many primary and secondary schools as I can. The biggest privilege and—dare I say it?—challenge of being an MP is not speaking in Chambers like this one but answering questions from young people in schools. When I visit schools, I find that young people are generally interested in politics. For example, the children of Paddox primary school in my constituency were hugely excited about the competition that staff are running about politics, with the prize being a tour of Parliament. A constituent of mine, Ian Dewes, the CEO of the Odyssey Collaborative Trust, said that Parliament’s education team “were fantastic” and pointed out that such visits helped to

“break down class and social barriers.”

When children of Long Lawford primary school welcomed me and the early years Minister for a visit, it was clear that their teachers had educated them well about the political system. Those are exemplars of best practice, but they should be standard across the whole country.

I would be grateful to hear from my hon. Friend the Minister about how her Department will ensure a more coherent, better resourced system that gives these subjects the higher priority that they deserve. I hope, first, that she will consider confirming citizenship as a statutory subject in the national curriculum at all stages, not just key stages 3 and 4; as with literacy, the younger we start, the deeper the understanding. Secondly, will she provide guidance to all schools about what they are expected to teach and resources to do so, including lesson packs and training for non-specialist teachers? Thirdly, will she ensure coherence and common standards across the entire maintained sector? Fourthly, will she reform progress 8 to ensure that any new system of measuring schools gives the same value to citizenship as to other national curriculum foundation GCSE subjects? Finally, will she take action to incentivise the training of specialist citizenship teachers?

Another part of learning about government and democracy should, of course, be participating in it within school and the wider world, as other hon. Members have said.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): As part of UK Parliament Week, I visited Ormiston Maritime academy, John Whitgift academy and Phoenix Park academy, and what struck me is that young people are very engaged in their local community and raise

really important issues that reflect the society they are experiencing. They have an awful lot to tell us about the kind of country they want to grow up in. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we can be more responsive in this place, it will give them a much greater connection to the changes they can make and the influence they can have on their local representatives?

**John Slinger:** I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend and thank her for that point. It is vital that we do everything we can in this place, and indeed in our constituencies, to listen to young people and empower them. We must not just listen to them but act on their concerns. Anything we can do, we must.

Primary and secondary schools that I have visited often run democratically elected school councils, which demonstrate to young people democracy in action and its role in enabling them to shape their environment. We must give our young people as many opportunities as possible to engage in that way. I will soon be holding a “pitch your policy” event in my constituency to encourage such engagement.

The importance of this topic cannot be overstated. We are fortunate to live in a secure but not invulnerable democracy. I met MPs from Moldova this week and asked about this topic, given the threats that their democratic system faces. They told me that it does feature in their curriculum and that they have school councils that are all about

“encouraging people to acknowledge their own power”.

These changes are about more than just a matter of curriculum rejuvenation, important though that is. If made, they can play a significant part in a democratic rejuvenation in our country. More broadly, to reinforce our system of democracy and government, we must have a campaign of education that goes far beyond our schools, with billboards, social media and mailshots.

I will end with some quotes from the most important people of all: young people. Austin Morris in year 11 said:

“Democracy isn’t just something we learn from a textbook; it’s a lesson we live every day at Rugby Free Secondary, where diverse voices, collaboration and fair decisions shape our school, and therefore shape the next generations of democratic society.”

A child from Paddox primary school said:

“Learning about democracy at school helps you to express your opinions and teaches you about wider topics related to what is going on in the world.”

Another said:

“It is also important to be able to have your voice heard in things that are important both at school and in the ‘real’ world.”

Another said:

“It is important for girls to vote in elections because they had to fight hard to get their vote in the first place.”

Finally—I like this one in particular—another said:

“If you don’t vote, you shouldn’t complain about things that happen because you didn’t use your democratic vote.”

I am sure that hon. Members will concur with that. Let us be inspired by those words and many others like them from schools up and down the country. Let us make sure that citizenship learning is a force that nourishes and defends our democratic system, and empowers our young people with the confidence to engage in it for the benefit of all.

4.18 pm

**The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):**

I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) on securing this timely debate on an incredibly important subject. He inspired us with his speech and the words of young people in particular. I know that education is a subject close to his heart, as he demonstrated clearly in his speech today. Having previously been a school governor and a trustee for Warwickshire Young Carers, I know that he shares our vision for ensuring that young people receive the right support to succeed in their education and to lead happy, healthy and productive lives.

I say that this debate is timely. It has been mentioned that we are celebrating UK Parliament Week this week, which is an incredible opportunity to get young people across the country to engage with Parliament and learn more about our democracy, our political system and how our country works. This Friday, I will be going to school assemblies across my constituency to speak to children about what I do as their MP and how they can engage in and shape their world. I am sure that many hon. Members will be doing the same. I had so many invites this year that it has been a real squeeze to fit them in. There are 35 schools from Newcastle upon Tyne North engaging in UK Parliament Week this year—I am not going to all of them—and it is fantastic that so many are getting involved.

From my own experience, some of the most powerful and persuasive engagement that I have had in my time in Parliament has come directly from children and young people in my constituency. I have lobbied previous Governments on their behalf on many different issues—the significance of now being on the receiving end of those requests is not lost on me. They have brilliant ideas that they express powerfully, so it is important that their voice is heard and their engagement supported.

**Melanie Onn:** The Minister is exactly right. In my visits so far this week, young people have raised serious and current issues, including knife crime, vaping and their impact on health. The idea that young people are divorced from the realities of society is not bearing out, but their connection with the political system is very separate. I am interested to hear her views on improving citizenship in schools.

**Catherine McKinnell:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. The last Labour Government recognised the importance of citizenship and participation in our education system, which is why they introduced citizenship education to the national curriculum at key stages 3 and 4 for maintained schools. They set up a framework to prepare pupils to play an active part in society and a platform to discuss issues that are important to them, from conflict to poverty, climate change, crime and security in our society.

Although it is optional for primary schools—my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby raised that as a concern—they are supported by non-statutory programmes at key stages 1 and 2, and the teaching of democracy forms a central part of the citizenship curriculum. That requires that pupils are taught about parliamentary democracy, the key elements of the constitution of the United Kingdom, the power of Government, how citizens and Parliament can hold Government to account, and the

different roles of the Executive, the legislature and the judiciary, and of course the free press. Pupils learn the skills of active citizenship through practical opportunities to address issues of concern to them and their wider community.

The Petersfield school in Hampshire and the Association for Citizenship Teaching delivered a joint parallel election project using real-life examples from the 2024 general election and involving nearly 30,000 students across 413 schools. It gave students hands-on experience of a democratic process—for example, asking them to work in teams to simulate election parties. It mirrored a real election, from analysing party manifestos to organising voter registration, holding hustings, holding elections and comparing the school results in the local constituency. Aside from that particular project, many schools will have engaged in the '24 election in a similar way, which is fantastic.

It is right that schools have a statutory duty as part of a broad and balanced curriculum to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development. The 2014 guidance supports schools in delivering that requirement. It acknowledges that people might hold different views about what is right and what is wrong, but a school's ethos and teaching should support the rule of English civil and criminal law, and that means embedding those fundamental values of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of people of different faiths and beliefs.

Schools embed those values most successfully when they do it right across the breadth of their provision. Whether they are taught specifically as part of a curriculum, reflected in behaviour policies, reinforced in assemblies or deepened through engagement opportunities—for example, experiencing the democratic process—we know that real experience can help young people to develop, engage in and assume those values in their own lives.

High and rising school standards are at the heart of the Government's mission to break down barriers to opportunity. We know that is how we can deliver the best life chances for every child, but we also know that too many young people go through their whole school lives without developing the communication and critical thinking skills that are so important for them to develop that democratic engagement.

That is why we are delivering our manifesto commitment with the independent curriculum and assessment review, as already mentioned. It is a good opportunity to look at how we deliver a curriculum that ensures young people feel represented, and helps them to develop the knowledge and skills required to thrive as citizens throughout their life. The review will look at the key challenges to attainment for young people and the barriers holding them back from opportunities and life chances. In particular, it will look at breaking down barriers for those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or those with special educational needs and disabilities.

The review has put out a call for evidence, which closes this Friday, so this is a good opportunity to encourage anyone with an interest in the issue to feed back as part of the review, because we are interested in views and we want to hear from as many people as possible. Anyone can also join live events on gov.uk and have their say in the curriculum and assessment process. Live events are being held around the country, so I encourage people to engage. The review will not decide what to recommend

formally until after the call for evidence closes. An interim report will be produced in early 2025 and the final recommendations will be published in autumn 2025.

Generally speaking, schools have the flexibility to organise the content and delivery of their citizenship curriculum to meet the needs of their pupils. That might include a whole range of issues, ideas and materials, including challenging or controversial subjects, but they need to ensure political balance. My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby made a specific point about the co-operative movement. Political movements and parties are not listed as part of the current citizenship curriculum, but schools can choose to talk about them as part of their democracy discussions.

The Department currently provides a range of support to the sector, particularly through the Educate Against Hate website, to help teachers discuss some of the really tricky issues. Support for curriculum delivery also comes from resources from the Oak National academy, which launched new curriculum sequences for secondary citizenship earlier this month. Obviously, there will be a full package of support in autumn 2025.

UK Parliament does fantastic work running educational tours for pupil, youth and community groups to see how Parliament works in action. It also produces resources, which can be downloaded or ordered for free and tailored to different age groups. This really is Christmas for UK Parliament. I thank staff for the work they do all year round, but particularly this week as we celebrate the level of engagement. I encourage all schools to engage and make use of the resources for young people.

On supporting the teaching workforce, the initial teacher training and early career framework sets out the entitlement of every trainee to get the necessary knowledge and skills. It is vital that teachers get support to do that important work of engaging and teaching young people about these issues.

I will take my hon. Friend's comments on board, and I thank him again for bringing forward the debate. It is great that it happened in this week of all weeks. I also thank all hon. Members for their contributions. It is vital that pupils have a sound understanding of the fundamental values upon which our society is founded and operates, including democracy, and their relevance to the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of living in modern Britain.

Schools clearly have a critical role to play in supporting pupils to develop those skills and attitudes. We know that many schools really embed an understanding of democracy, but we also know that the curriculum and assessment review is an opportunity to see how we can do that even better. I will finish by thanking my hon. Friend again for his fantastic opening speech. In giving a voice to his constituents, he is clearly embedding democratic values within his local area. I am sure that every MP will take the opportunity to do the same during UK Parliament Week.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Flood Preparedness: Norfolk

4.30 pm

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered flood preparedness in Norfolk.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am delighted to have secured this important debate on flood preparedness in Norfolk, and I am pleased to see colleagues from across the county and across the parties. The hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) has long championed the issue, and I am pleased to join him in the fight. The challenges that we face are so significant and have such an impact that we have to come together to tackle them. I am pleased to be able to facilitate that today.

Norfolk's seas and waterways are one of our country's greatest treasures. Our rivers are enjoyed by many for swimming, paddling, kayaking and canoeing. The Norfolk broads are a much-loved national park: a unique waterway that nurtures flora and fauna, and keeps alive a great tradition of sailing and navigation. Our coastline and seas are precious for local residents and drive our tourism economy. They even brought a visit from the Liberal Democrat leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), who enjoyed a dip in the sea in Sheringham with me during the election campaign.

Norfolk's landscapes are also low-lying and flat, filled with farmland and floodplains. While that combination of waterways and low-lying land contributes to Norfolk's being the most beautiful county in the country, it presents a perfect storm for flooding problems. Hundreds of years ago, the Norfolk broads were simply a huge estuary. Work over the centuries has tamed the waterways into what they are today, but without continued work, nature will simply return our area to the North sea. In the words of my local water management director, we have to "make maintenance sexy!" The Romans began the work, and it would be a tragedy if this were the generation that finally gave up. Not on my watch.

There are very few areas of Norfolk that are not afflicted by flooding concerns. I hear worries from residents all over my constituency, from councillors and colleagues around the county, and from the agencies that work so hard to alleviate such problems.

**Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): My constituency is a long way from my hon. Friend's, but it is criss-crossed by rivers. Last month my residents suffered an inundation, when we had a month's rainfall in one day. Does he agree that one of the challenges is the lack of co-ordination between the multitude of agencies that have responsibility for this area? Does he also agree that the legacy of the last Conservative Government was the underfunding of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and of local planning authorities, which affected their flood prevention activities?

**Steff Aquarone**: I agree with both of my hon. Friend's points, and I will speak about them in a moment. My hope is that by solving the issue of joined-up working in Norfolk, we can transport that model to his constituency and elsewhere.

A key motivation of mine in securing a debate on this issue at this time was the important public meeting I chaired recently in Hickling. Nine different agencies



[Steff Aquarone]

sent their representatives to share the work they are undertaking to prevent flooding in the area. They also told us of their personal fears and frustrations. They spoke of the challenges with the funding system and our changing climate, and of the regulations and responsibilities that are stymying their ability to make change.

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this important debate. He is right that there are a multitude of agencies that have partial responsibility, creating a network of overlapping duties and responsibilities. We are lucky in Norfolk that we have the Norfolk Strategic Flooding Alliance, under the capable directorship of Henry Cator, a constituent of mine. Will the hon. Member take this opportunity to congratulate the alliance and Mr Cator, and will he focus on the absolute importance of strategic dredging, particularly in the Norfolk broads?

**Steff Aquarone**: I thank the hon. Member for his work on flood prevention, and I absolutely echo his sentiments. I will be quoting Henry Cator in just a moment. He was on the panel I mentioned, and I pledged to him and others that I would support them in tackling all of this. That meeting allowed the agencies to hear directly from local residents about their experience and knowledge of the area, developed over decades, and to factor it into their plans and ensure that the community and relevant agencies work in lockstep as they bring forward a more flood-resilient future for the affected broads villages.

Residents of North Norfolk have endless stories of how flooding has impacted them and their community. I heard from a business owner in the boating industry who has spent £40,000 fixing the impact of flooding on the marina that she manages. Another local business estimates that it lost out on £140,000 of revenue during a period when it could not operate because of flood damage. Even the most basic things are made harder: one resident apologised to me that their response to my invitation to the meeting I mentioned was delayed because their driveway was flooded and impassable for the postman.

In the short term, we must look at the fundamental issues across all levels of government that have allowed the situation to get as bad as it has. The agencies I met with are working incredibly hard, but they can only work with what they have. A major issue that many of them face is that their funding settlements are rarely delivered more than one year ahead.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I also live far away from Norfolk, but Somerset obviously has a record of flooding—in fact, it is named Somerset because it was the county where people lived in summer. Environment Agency data shows that 2,692 properties in my constituency are at risk of flooding, and unless basic maintenance is conducted on drainage and flood-defence systems, the figure will continue to rise. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is wrong for the Environment Agency to have a £34 million deficit in its maintenance budget?

**Steff Aquarone**: I totally agree. Lots of money is already there, not to mention the stuff that is missing, but we have to use it in a more joined-up and strategic way. I could go on, but I will return to my speech.

The projects that need to be undertaken to make a real difference will take time, but they will have a huge payoff. Being forced into short-term thinking means that the responsible agencies cannot make secure plans to take the strategic actions they need to. I hope that the Minister will consider changing the arrangement to give the responsible agencies the ability to set longer-term budgets. That would be a huge boost to their medium and long-term planning, and could get off the ground so many vital flood-alleviation projects that are being stalled by the current funding set-up. As the chair of the Norfolk Strategic Flooding Alliance succinctly put it to me:

“Prevention is a lot less expensive than flooding.”

In fact, every pound spent on prevention prevents a further £14 of damage. I hope that the Minister will seriously reflect on that, particularly in the light of the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke).

Frustratingly, in many cases, it is not just the money that is lacking, but the necessary power to make change. The responsibilities and powers are broken up and siloed across councils, agencies and statutory bodies; all of them have expertise and experience, but it cannot be easily shared between them. I ask simply but kindly: why does it take nine months and two public meetings to decide what to do and how to spend the money we already have? I would love to tour my constituency bringing the kind of meeting I mentioned to every community, but that is simply not the most effective way of delivering the action that residents are crying out for.

The Netherlands has a Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management: a clearly responsible Department with the power to tackle an issue that is fundamental to that nation. We must accept that Britain floods—it always has done. A joined-up approach, with a clearly responsible body, is the only way we can ensure that powers are collected sensibly to allow for funding and direction decisions to be made in the best interests of communities.

Let us take a look at how flood prevention actually functions in the area that I and my Norfolk colleagues represent—I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am a Norfolk county councillor. Norfolk county council is the lead flood authority, but it does not have the money to tackle the issues that it reports on. The council's scrutiny committee considered that just yesterday, and concluded that there needs to be a focus on legislation to make it fit for purpose. After every serious event, it writes useful, sensible and impactful flood prevention reports, which outline how to prevent flooding from happening again, but once it finishes its reports, it has nowhere near the necessary money to implement any of its own recommendations.

That set-up would be utterly farcical if it were not so serious. It seems that my residents need all the stars to align to make anything happen, and that will not cut the mustard as water pours into their front rooms and destroys their belongings.

**David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for giving some excellent examples, particularly from the Netherlands, which is wonderful at water management. Like him, many across my constituency have to deal with the impact of flooding

year after year. Does he agree that to tackle flooding, we must improve the management of land upstream, including the restoration of peatlands, heathlands and native woodlands, and that our farmers are great allies in this quest?

**Steff Aquarone:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. In my experience as a county councillor over the past seven years, I have seen changing attitudes in the farming community, with farmers having moved from wanting to get the water off their land and into the river system as soon as possible, to wanting to build attenuation methods upstream and upland to help prevent flooding further downland, but they face planning barriers and all sorts of other hurdles that make that practically unviable.

I want to touch on the issues faced by our farmers in North Norfolk. As well as talking to me yesterday about inheritance tax changes, many farmers raised concerns about how flooding impacts their land. Access to the farming recovery fund seems, to my farmers and me, to be scattergun and confusing; the restrictive criteria mean that some are receiving payouts for land that has hardly been touched by flooding, while not receiving anything for land that has spent months underwater, simply because they are either lucky or unlucky with DEFRA criteria and algorithms.

William, a farmer in my constituency, told me yesterday that he had 30 acres of potato crop waterlogged for months on end, and totally unharvestable. He lost £100,000-worth of potatoes, but received no payout because he was told his land was not eligible. We know that our farmers operate on the slimmest profit margins to feed our country, and flooding is yet another challenge hammering them and their businesses. Norfolk's farmers feel that they are being punished by the quirks of the system, and are in the dark about how to get the help that they need.

The Minister has heard me raise a lot of problems so far, but I want to reassure her that the Government can achieve some quick wins. There are some things with simple solutions. First, we need to ensure that the insurance landscape for flooding is viable. I am appreciative of the Flood Re scheme, but we must ensure that it will achieve its mission to create a risk-reflective pricing model by the time it exits the market in 2039, and that it covers all types of flood risk, including coastal erosion, which rapidly eats away at the North Norfolk coast.

I also feel that we need to place a greater duty on our insurers to carry out the actions in flood prevention reports after incidents occur. Insurers currently put properties back to the state they were in before the flooding, rather than being required to support residents to ensure that the flooding cannot happen again. For example, why are insurers replacing ankle-height sockets in properties they know could flood again, when logic would dictate that they need to be moved higher up to protect them in the future? My residents have been left in a scenario where they know what needs to happen to prevent future flooding, but the actions are not forthcoming. It is totally unacceptable, and I hope the Minister will indicate that she is open to reviewing this area of law, if that is the reform we need to fix these issues.

There is a very real human impact of the failings of this set-up. I have spoken with one of my constituents who has been flooded twice, forced to move out of her

home for months, and still struggles to secure the changes she needs to avoid yet more flooding. Anglian Water is responsible for increasing the drainage capacity, the highways department is responsible for trying to redirect the water flow off the road away from her property, and her insurers have to help her piece her life back together again. All those agencies and organisations have been unable to secure funding or have been limited in their powers. She will want to hear from the Minister today an assurance that she will not carry on falling through the cracks and being a repeat victim of predictable problems, and will finally receive the long-lasting solution she needs and deserves.

Whenever we discuss damaging floods, which are becoming all the more regular, we must address the elephant in the room that is man-made climate change. It is no coincidence that we see more extreme weather events, storms and flooding when our climate is being so drastically damaged. If we do not deviate from the course of climate crisis, resilience measures will become obsolete as the emergency worsens. The current modelling on what we need to prevent and alleviate flooding looks backwards at data and trends from the past, but climate change is bringing extreme weather and flooding that we have never seen before. If we cannot handle what has gone before, we do not stand a chance of tackling what has yet to come. We have to incorporate the climate emergency into our thinking on this issue far more realistically.

Norfolk is proudly at the cutting edge of the green energy transformation that we need to fight climate change. We are proud to be playing our part in saving the planet, but if the homes of those working on these projects, and the businesses and suppliers for them, are flooding, and the infrastructure itself is at risk of flooding, we cannot help. We want to play our part and we need the support to do so.

I hope the Government can think holistically when tackling the challenges of flooding. It is not just an environment issue; it impacts our local economy, our emergency services and our health systems. I fear the cost of failure here simply is not understood, but I can assure the Government that they cannot afford it. While we are talking about Norfolk today, improving flood preparedness across the country will positively impact so much more than just the people whose homes and businesses are flooding today.

This challenge is immediate. The time for waiting around and delay has long passed and we are staring down the barrel of a tough—and possibly disastrous—winter. This is not about just protecting the highest possible number of chimney pots, but preserving a beautiful, historic natural landscape and a way of life that has served Norfolk for generations. I hope that as the Government listen to the contributions in this debate and consider their future actions as a result, in the forefront of their minds are the affected residents and business owners, villages such as Hickling and Potter Heigham, and the communities begging us not to carry on with the status quo.

4.46 pm

**Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab):** I congratulate the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) on securing this debate. Next door in Suffolk we share the same coast and many of the same problems, being so low-lying.

[*Jess Asato*]

I am sad to say that in Lowestoft we are not adequately protected against severe flooding such as we experienced, to devastating effect, in 2013. Prior to the installation of flood wall protection measures last year, Lowestoft was the only coastal town without any formal tidal flood defences, and we remain very much at risk.

We had a flood barrier project ready to go, one that would have protected 1,500 residential properties and 800 businesses and was an excellent example of partnership bidding. However, East Suffolk council was forced to abandon those plans earlier this year because the Conservative Government had delayed and delayed a funding decision for so long that it was no longer possible to continue. They avoided paying £100 million to complete a project that would have protected our town for 100 years and seen a return of £700 million a year in gross value added. The previous Government ran out the clock on the scheme and kicked the can down the road, as they did with so much else. With Lowestoft due a flood on the scale of 2013 every 20 years, residents are rightly worried. Resurrecting that scheme immediately is sadly not possible, but I am determined that we find a viable way forward.

Without our flood barrier, the advanced plans we have for the regeneration of the area around Lake Lothing are jeopardised, hugely increasing costs for the redevelopment of the former JELD-WEN factory site, which would help us to meet the Government's ambitious house building targets by adding up to 500 homes. However, the growth benefits of flooding protection measures are not reflected in how our flooding funding formula works. The formula as it exists now effectively protects wealthier areas and leaves poorer areas such as ours to fend for themselves. As such, it essentially bakes in inequality.

I would be grateful if the Minister could look into a review of the current flooding funding formula. We need to factor in the potential for growth, for unlocking house building and for industrial progress when it comes to allocating funds. If we are able to do that, not only can we save what we already have, but we can build for a better future.

4.48 pm

**George Freeman** (Mid Norfolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) on bringing this debate to the House. It is great to see so many colleagues from all parties. If ever there was an issue that unites us all, it is this. At the beginning of my fifth Parliament, I have never seen so many all-party parliamentary groups set up or seen them so well attended—most struggle to find enough Members to be quorate. I have been to four, each with about 30 people from all parties in the room. I welcome what the Minister has said about properly reviewing and getting to grips with this issue and wish her well. She will find a lot of parliamentary support for bold reforming action, which is long overdue.

For me, this began in the inland constituency of Mid Norfolk—the clue is in the name. It has no coast and is largely Breckland; it should be dry. So why am I leading the charge on flooding? It is because in 2020, I and many of my constituents spent the Christmas period

using mops and buckets in our houses as great rains swept through. In so many parts of the country, areas that have not traditionally been affected by flooding suddenly are. We set up the Mid Norfolk Flood Partnership with 13 villages, and we set up the Norfolk Strategic Flooding Alliance. I pay tribute to Lord Dannatt, who set up the alliance, and Henry Cator, who now runs it very well. We were in the process of convening Norfolk's first inland flood summit, which was postponed because of the election. It is very important.

There are 36 organisations in Norfolk alone tasked with and sharing responsibility for dealing with flooding. None of them are able to take responsibility properly. I will be kind, but the buck gets passed. People have had enough. We need a summit in which we, the representatives of the people of Norfolk, can gather with those agencies and get on top of where the flooding is happening, where it is becoming more intense, what is being done about it and prioritised for our county, and the short, medium and long-term plan.

I have prepared a private Member's Bill to support the Minister; I will be introducing it shortly and I hope it will contribute to the reforms that she is considering. I hope it will be good enough that she decides to incorporate it into her reforms. I will speak in a moment about what that Bill sets out to do but, as with so many public policy problems, it is worth being clear about what the problem is and what is causing it.

First, I want to suggest climate change. Earlier this year, we had the wettest seven months on record, and we have had the wettest past few years on record. That is what is driving the problem.

Secondly, in my part of the world, that problem is compounded by a huge amount of housing. The boundaries changed because about 10,000 extra houses have been built in Mid Norfolk in the past 14 years. Many of them are built on the outskirts of villages, without proper drainage infrastructure, which has meant plugging modern drains into Victorian village drain infrastructure. When there is intense rain, it all merges and sewage starts rising through people's gardens and lavatories.

Thirdly, I mention riparian rights: we have seen huge confusion about who is actually responsible for maintaining ditches. Fourthly, there is contract farming, or an increase in outsourcing farming to contractors. In the old days on our family farm, in quiet months we would clear the ditches and mend the fences. These days, that kind of stuff is not always in the contract. Ditches are being neglected because of the reality of modern contract farming.

Fifthly, Anglian Water has been focusing—and I will be kind—on supplying water to the east and on mitigating leakage. It is investing billions. Ten years ago, the problem was loss of water, and that is still the case in the summer months. However, in winter, we have a massive problem. We need to make sure that our water companies are investing in the problem in the latter half of the year, as well as dealing with the shortages in the summer. Of course, catchment geography, habitat, and water maintenance and retention link those two issues.

Sixthly, there is huge confusion about responsibilities. Nationally, the responsibility sits with the Environment Agency, and I think its budget is just over £2 billion a year. However, try ringing the Environment Agency about a problem in Norfolk—or, I dare say, in Suffolk; it is



lovely to see the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) sneaking into a Norfolk debate to support us. I am talking about organisational responsibility at the top, in an agency that has many other responsibilities, some of which directly go against the interests of getting water off the land and down rivers fast. I am also talking about the situation on the ground. Responsibility for dealing with, mitigating and handling flooding is unfunded, so the local flood authority really has no budget in Norfolk. It has a few powers, which it cannot enforce, and no budget to do it properly.

Seventhly, the real heroes of flood management in this country are the internal drainage boards, who—as you will know, Sir Christopher—have been successfully doing proper local watercourse management since about the 15th century. They have seen their powers reduced and their funding removed. As is so often the way in modern Governments, powers go upstream, to higher and higher levels, with less and less real, practical support on the ground. Those 15 or 16 areas—district councils that are most on the frontline of flooding—are now having massively to support internal drainage board infrastructure investments. We are charging taxpayers hugely in the high flood areas to pay for infrastructure that we are all funding. An Association of District Councils special interest group has been set up to tackle that, and it is helping me with my Bill.

Eighthly, the IDBs are funded by precepts, which is not appropriate for the scale of infrastructure that we need today. Ninthly, there is a huge lack of proper monitoring: one of the things that we will find at the first Norfolk flood summit is that we do not have a map—or certainly no live digital map. Where are the flood hotspots in our county? We are not properly capturing the data, which means that the Minister will not have proper data to support her policy making and the Cabinet Office resilience unit does not have proper data on where that growing inland flood risk is.

There is then flooding on the ground, as we had last year; I will cite one example, at Mill lane in Attleborough. Four people who live next to a culvert have been flooded every year for the past 10 years, and their lives are misery. Last year, for the first time, 100 other houses were flooded because the culvert has been allowed to silt up gradually. Anglian Water handed over its riparian rights when no one was looking about 12 or 15 years ago, and no one was aware that those rights now sat locally in the town. The land-use practice upstream meant that the water was not being captured properly on the farm, and with a whole lot of new housing and climate change, there was then a big problem. It has taken a huge amount of work to set up the local Mill lane flood prevention group, and the community has cleaned out the ditches and dredged the river, with 70 tonnes of stuff taken out. It has been a huge project, for which I pay tribute to the local councillor, Taila Taylor, and others.

We cannot afford to do that in every single place around the country; far better to invest in prevention in the first place. Of course, people who have suffered flooding then hit the next problems: how do they insure their houses? How will we compensate people who cannot sell their houses? How will we ensure that, as others have said, the Flood Re scheme is fit for purpose? This is a huge issue and I know the Minister has gripped it. My Bill sets out four main clauses and four main

reforms—I believe I have sent the Minister an early draft, but I will send her a better one. I thank all those colleagues who are helping with it.

Clause 1 sets out responsibilities and makes clear that we need to cascade them down to the ground, as well as making it clearer who is actually responsible for prevention and mitigation. Clause 2 looks at funding and says that some of that £2 billion-odd with the Environment Agency has to cascade down, and we have to support the IDBs and the local flood authorities properly. Controversially, clause 3 looks at liabilities. I want to suggest that, when house builders dump large quantities of housing on the outskirts of villages, it is not good enough just to pipe the drains into the old Victorian architecture. They have to upgrade it, and I think the only way they will do so is if they are on the hook for any downstream flooding that might occur. Clause 4 looks at data monitoring and accountability.

I close by sincerely welcoming the Minister's very quickly committing to reviewing this issue properly. As well as listening to her officials, who I know will have 101 reasons to take it gently and to be cautious and steady, I urge the Minister to listen to colleagues across this House. I think she will be a hero—there will be culverts named after her for decades to come. I hesitate to suggest this, but it will be one of the biggest issues of this Parliament for our constituents, and the Minister has the chance to grip it right at the beginning and put right something that has been neglected for several decades.

4.58 pm

**Terry Jermy** (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) on securing this hugely important debate. I have had the pleasure of serving alongside him not just here in this place but in Norfolk county council, of which we have both been members for a number of years. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as both a serving Norfolk county councillor and a Breckland district councillor. The issues are the same—we are talking about flooding in this case—but the setting is somewhat different.

Flooding is a significant concern in Norfolk, as has been mentioned, and I have been left so frustrated about flooding incidents in my local communities. The time taken to look into some of the causes of flooding and the recommendations for mitigation is woeful. In some cases, it can take up to two years, and often residents are repeatedly flooded before we have seen the reports on the initial incident. It must be said that local councils are woefully under-resourced. They must be given additional resources and powers to respond to the increasing flood risks. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for mentioning internal drainage boards, which I have already raised in Parliament, because they are an increasing concern for many councils.

In my constituency, King's Lynn and West Norfolk borough council now contributes the equivalent of 43% of all its council tax income to funding IDB levies—that is incredible. I am delighted to say that, since Labour has taken office, we have seen progress, with additional funding of more than £250,000 for King's Lynn and West Norfolk borough council alone. I also welcome

[Terry Jermy]

the new flood resilience taskforce launched to turbocharge flood preparedness and the delivery of flood defences. I was delighted last week when an extra £50 million was announced for internal drainage boards, which have been neglected for far too long. I am pleased that the Government recognise their vital contribution, which shows Labour's commitment to the challenge.

I pay tribute to Welney Flood Watch in my constituency. The team play a vital role, helping residents to know whether the A1101, which is appropriately named the Welney Wash Road, is passable. I was delighted to meet one of the volunteers, Ken, yesterday in Parliament. Without that intervention, residents often get caught out by the changing and unpredictable water levels in that area. That is a fine example of community spirit, but we cannot leave it solely to volunteers to fix the cracks that are so evident in the system and that will become more common because of climate change.

I believe that we in this room have a moral obligation not to leave the planet in a worse state than we found it in. We must protect the here and now. Failure to tackle the root causes and the imminent threats of flooding will cost us socially, economically and environmentally, as has been pointed out. We need only look at areas such as Valencia over the past few weeks to see the devastating impact of flooding, the damage to livelihoods and housing and, in that case, the tragic loss of so many lives.

I know that the Minister understands the importance of the issue; I have spoken to her about it on several occasions. The task at hand could not be clearer. The Environment Agency states that up to one in six UK properties are now at risk of flooding, and it is going to get even worse. It cuts across numerous constituencies, and not just in Norfolk. I am in South West Norfolk, the county's furthest constituency from the coast, but it is still a huge challenge.

After 14 years of Conservative neglect and underfunding and the forgoing of the scientific warning signs, communities up and down the country have been left unnecessarily exposed to flood damage. The previous Government slashed resources for the Environment Agency, the key agency tasked with flood preparedness and response, by two thirds from 2010, leaving families and businesses to pay the price of extreme floods.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Norfolk for securing this debate and raising this important issue. It is now up to Labour to protect our local economy and the national environment.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair):** Order. I will have to call the Front Benchers at 5.10 pm, so I hope that the two Norfolk Members who are standing can share the remaining seven minutes between them.

5.3 pm

**Adrian Ramsay** (Waveney Valley) (Green): Thank you, Sir Christopher. I hope that other hon. Members understand the need to prioritise Norfolk Members in this debate on Norfolk flooding, though I know we share concerns about the issues. I will try to summarise my remarks.

I thank the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) for securing this crucial debate and for highlighting the underlying issues to be tackled, including maintenance and understanding the climate risks and the reasons for these problems. I also thank the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) for his comments; I look forward to the first Norfolk flood summit.

Like other hon. Members, I have countless examples in my constituency. On Mill Lane in Needham village and in Shelfanger and Winfarthing, residents have been significantly affected by flooding in recent years; some have been unable to return to their home since Storm Babet. There were 14 homes badly flooded in a single night, which highlights the extreme impact. The hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) will be pleased to hear that I also have examples from the Suffolk part of my constituency, because we need to ensure that we look at the issue region-wide.

To expand on other Members' contributions, I will focus on nature-based solutions, which have a big part to play in addressing the issue upstream. Slowing down, capturing and storing rainwater brings additional benefits, improving biodiversity, sequestering carbon, enhancing soil life and creating valuable wildlife habitats.

The River Waveney Trust in my constituency is doing fantastic work on projects in places such as Diss and Gissing. It is using funding from DEFRA to carry out work that restores floodplains, plants trees, creates ponds and installs leaky dams. Such things are having a practical impact in reducing flooding and flood risks, but at the moment those works are often carried out by excellent but small charities fighting over pots of money that are not big enough. The DEFRA funding of £25 million needs to be much bigger if we are to tackle the problem at scale across the country. I know that the Minister is committed to addressing the issues and is listening, so I am looking for more funding.

I highlight my private Member's Bill, the Nature-based Solutions (Water and Flooding) Bill, which would require public bodies and water companies to allocate at least 10% to 25% of their budgets to nature-friendly management schemes, ensuring more widespread adoption of nature-based solutions. I hope that the Minister will consider it among the reforms that are being looked at, and that it will get some support from colleagues in Norfolk and beyond.

To ensure that others can speak, I will conclude. I hope that the wide-ranging concerns that have been raised today are taken seriously, that adequate funding is put in place, that we ensure that there are joined-up solutions to addressing maintenance, that there is no more buck-passing, and that nature-based solutions get proper focus and attention.

5.6 pm

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) on securing this debate. My constituency has a magnificent coastline, as well as some of the precious chalk streams that our country is lucky to have, and we face significant flood challenges that need to be addressed. Sadly, with the record-breaking rainfall that we have had, many villages, homes, gardens, streets and businesses across North West Norfolk have felt the awful impact of flooding. Last winter, I helped many constituents in the

Burnhams, the Creakes, Pott Row, Roydon, Grimston and many other villages. The high water levels and groundwater levels mean that that risk is here once again.

Dealing with the problem needs better co-ordination. As we have heard, Norfolk county council is the local lead flood authority, but it cannot direct anyone; it does not have the funding. It cannot even require people to co-operate with it or deal with the culverts and riparian issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) mentioned. That means that even when they have the equipment and are ready to step in to do the maintenance work, they cannot do so, for legal reasons. That is why I supported the creation of the Norfolk Strategic Flooding Alliance, which is doing good work.

I helped to get multi-agency groups set up to deal with some of the issues in the villages that I have named. That has seen investment in dealing with the infiltration and inundation that causes the flooding and the unpleasant consequences. We need more of that investment to deal with the issues, to improve pumping station capacity and to make other improvements, and there is a need for far greater clarity. That is why I will strongly support the Bill that my hon. Friend will be introducing imminently.

We also need to make better use of local knowledge. When I am out with constituents, they understand the way the rivers and the flows go together. That can be very helpful, particularly when the Environment Agency does not have many people on the ground or who understand the catchment. That is something that can be tapped into more broadly.

An area that has not really been touched on is our need to improve the welfare support when things go wrong. I have been to the homes of elderly and vulnerable constituents who have been unable to use their toilets, sinks and showers for many weeks, and all they have been offered is a portaloos at most. That is completely unacceptable. Far better co-ordination is needed. My constituents do not really care who is responsible; they just want people to take responsibility. The Norfolk Strategic Flooding Alliance has put together a working group to look at that, but obviously it is an issue that can be dealt with across the country.

Finally, I want to touch on the importance of coastal flood defences, particularly in the area of my constituency between Snettisham and Heacham, which is made up of a natural shingle bank and stretches of concrete defences. The Environment Agency has begun a review of the Wash East coast management plan, which is there to protect the properties, the holiday homes and the agricultural land, which is very important. I recently met the Environment Agency, because there is concern locally that it says that it does not need to do the periodic recharging project and that, if it did, it would not have the funding or technical capability to do so. We cannot accept the managed decline in this area. We need to hold the line; that should be a common cause. There needs to be funding and support for the shoreline management plan for 2025 and beyond.

Fundamentally, these issues are about working together. The inaugural flooding and drought summit in January, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk referred, will provide a forum to do that. I very much hope that the Minister will accept the invitation that I believe has been extended to her to come and hear about Norfolk and the plans that we have to solve these problems.

5.9 pm

**Charlotte Cane** (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): Thank you, Sir Christopher, for chairing this important debate on flood preparedness in Norfolk. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) on securing this debate and on his excellent speech highlighting the many challenges to flood preparedness in Norfolk and across our region. Indeed, I congratulate all hon. Members from Norfolk and our region, and from other places in the country, on their speeches and the points that they have made. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, in which I note that I am a member of East Cambridgeshire district council.

This debate highlights the region's ongoing struggles with flooding, which are compounded by its low-lying landscapes and extensive waterways, and the impacts of climate change. The area's rivers, broads and coastline are rightly cherished. When managed well, they mitigate and reduce flooding, but when under-managed they contribute to significant flooding risks. This issue, which has existed for centuries, requires sustained, co-ordinated efforts to prevent further damage, but without adequate long-term funding, local authorities and agencies are unable to implement effective long-term solutions.

Many Members have raised their constituents' personal experiences, including the substantial financial losses faced by local businesses as a result of flood damage, and the stress facing people at risk of flooding. They have highlighted systemic issues, including the limited funding for agencies, which is allocated on an annual basis, preventing them from planning long-term projects. This debate stresses the need for a number of changes in Government policies, such as moving to multi-year budgets for flood prevention efforts and closer co-ordination between responsible bodies.

The fragmented approach to flood management, with responsibilities spread across various councils and agencies and some private individuals, is another significant barrier. Members have pointed out the inefficiencies and lack of co-ordination, calling for a more unified approach, much like that of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management in the Netherlands. We have even heard that Norfolk county council, despite being the lead flood authority, faces the absurdity of crafting detailed flood prevention plans without the financial backing to implement them.

The difficulties faced by local farmers, who struggle to access flood relief funds because of confusing and restrictive criteria, have also been raised today. Farmers already operating with slim profit margins face further hardships as flooding damages their crops or even prevents planting or harvesting.

Beyond the financial and logistical challenges, the mental health impact of flooding is significant. The constant fear of future flooding takes a toll on residents and on the workers involved in flood management. I share Members' calls for more holistic support for both flood-affected communities and the people working to mitigate these issues.

As we have heard, the last Conservative Government slashed flood protection plans for homes and failed to invest in flood defences, leaving communities to fend for themselves. The Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to bring forward £5.2 billion of flood



[Charlotte Cane]

defence spending to ensure that flood defences are built more quickly, and to ringfence funding allocations for flood risk management that works with nature.

**Cameron Thomas** (Tewkesbury) (LD): It heartens me to hear Members across the House acknowledging the impacts of climate change on flooding in our constituencies. Will my hon. Friend join me in asking that the Government's national planning policy framework accounts for areas prone to flooding, keeping our remaining floodplains undeveloped?

**Charlotte Cane:** I agree that we need to make sure that as we are planning and building, we take flood risk into account and ensure that we are properly mitigating it.

In her 2024 autumn Budget, the Chancellor committed £2.4 billion over the next couple of years for flood defences, but she added that significant funding pressures on this Budget meant that it would be necessary to review the plans for 2025-26. It is crucial that this funding is committed in the long term to allow communities to create sustainable flood preparedness plans for years to come.

The Liberal Democrats support the Climate and Nature Bill, which was introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), because it will restore the natural environment through the large-scale restoration of peatland, heathland, native woodland, salt marshes, wetlands and coastal waters. That will absorb carbon, protect against floods, improve water quality and protect habitats. The Liberal Democrats would also implement new planning powers to require sustainable drainage systems to be installed.

**Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair):** Order. I cannot order the hon. Lady to sit down, but we should comply with the convention for one-hour debates: Opposition spokesmen should have five minutes each and the Minister should have 10 minutes to respond.

**Charlotte Cane:** I am sorry, Sir Christopher. I will draw my remarks to a close.

5.15 pm

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) on securing this important debate and Members from both sides of the House on all their contributions. There is a large degree of cross-party consensus on this issue.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the importance of a joined-up approach to this issue and said that prevention is much better than treatment. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) has shown great leadership in this area with his Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) talked about the importance of welfare support for victims, and that was echoed by the hon. Member for Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane) when it comes to the mental health impacts of flooding.

As we face more extreme weather, it is right that we discuss the Government's role in flood prevention, preparedness and management. In the last 12 months or so, we have seen the terrible effects of Storm Babet,

Storm Ciarán and Storm Henk all within a few weeks of each other. I sympathise with anyone who has ever been flooded. We know the huge impact it has on people, homes, businesses, farmland, animals and so much more. It is heartbreaking. We must not forget that the mental health impacts on at-risk communities are huge, from the anxiety about being flooded to the trauma of being flooded itself.

We must support our communities long after the floodwaters have subsided and the blue lights have left. I pay tribute to the amazing efforts during floods of Environment Agency staff, the emergency services, first responders and local volunteer groups. In serious floods, I have seen at first hand the importance of all that these folk do to help people in awful and sometimes tragic circumstances.

I also pay tribute to the mental health charities that Members present will be familiar with: You Are Not Alone, or YANA, in East Anglia, as well as RABI, Yellow Wellies and the Farmers Community Network. I ask the Minister to set out the steps the Government are taking to provide the holistic support that flood victims need to get back on their feet, and particularly to address the mental health consequences that flood victims face, too often in silence.

The last Conservative Government had a strong record on flood preparedness. They published a policy statement to make England more resilient, with 40 actions and five ambitious policies stemming from it. Between 2015 and 2021, the last Government invested £2.6 billion in flood defences, which better protected 314,000 homes all over England. Furthermore, in March 2020, it was announced that the flooding budget would be doubled to £5.2 billion over the next six-year spending period, to deploy more flood schemes.

While the new Labour Government have sadly shown their hand and cruelly disregarded farmers with their heartless family farm tax, the previous Government backed the farming sector and introduced several schemes to introduce climate or environment benefits and to compensate farmers simultaneously. Environmental land management schemes paid farmers to increase our resilience to flooding through nature-based solutions and natural flood management techniques such as tree planting or re-wiggling rivers. That rightly rewarded farmers with public funding for providing public goods, on which we all rely. I urge the Government to move forward in these areas.

The last Government also provided £50 million to expand the farming recovery fund to ensure that farmers on farms of all sizes across the country who are hit by flooding and exceptional wet weather receive support. The Labour Government have been very slow in getting some of that money out. I know that things have moved in the past few days, but I urge them to get that money out the door. We have to reward our farmers both for producing food and for their stewardship of the environment. Yesterday's protests in Westminster showed the passion of our farming communities. I urge the Government to think again and reverse their cruel family farm tax.

As we have heard, the flooding budget is under review. Can the Minister confirm that the Government will not cut it when they review it in the coming years? We must invest in flood defences, given climate change and the extreme weather events that are upon us.

The Minister will be familiar with the Flood Re scheme. There are concerns that it supports homes and not businesses. I urge the Government to consider expanding it, because many people who live above their businesses are not covered. We have also heard about the importance of the IDBs. I urge the Government to ensure that that vital service is maintained.

In summary, communities at risk of flooding need certainty and holistic support. They need prevention measures and response when flooding arrives. I hope the Minister will outline how this Labour Government will provide that.

5.20 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher.

I thank everybody who has taken part in the debate and in particular the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) for securing it in the first place. We are in danger of an outbreak of unity, which is always quite dangerous in Parliament, but I must say that every contribution has shown the importance of tackling flooding and why it means so much to each and every one of us.

A number of Members mentioned mental health. To be honest, one of the reasons I was so attracted to this brief to begin with is that I represent an area that suffered tragically from floods in 2007. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), is quite right to point out that, long after the flood water has receded and the blue lights have left, the mental health impacts continue. I should also welcome the hon. Gentleman to his new post. I have listened to his contributions to debates on environmental, farming and rural affairs issues, and I recognise his expertise, especially on veterinary issues, so it is a genuine pleasure to see him on the Front Bench.

A few Members mentioned the tragic situation that we have seen in Spain, which is a sobering reminder of how devastating flooding can be. I also thank the Environment Agency and everybody involved in addressing flooding.

I have been scribbling frantically, so I hope that I will cover as many points as possible and do that dangerous thing of actually answering some of the questions that have been asked. To begin with, am I going to make maintenance sexy? Well, I will do my best to make it sexy, and one thing we should look at is the flooding formula. We published a written ministerial statement just last week about how we allocate money for flooding, one aspect of which is looking at maintenance. Previously, the focus has been on the number of new properties protected, such that maintenance has, I think, been neglected. I urge hon. Members to look at that statement if they have not already seen it.

When we talk about the budget, I am very keen to talk about building new defences and maintaining existing defences. As for natural flood management, I love it. One way to get on my good side is to start talking about SUDS—sustainable drainage systems—or natural flood management, so I am feeling very happy now. The hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) is quite right about how they deliver in terms of affordability, nature and flood protection. I am a huge fan.

The Environment Agency will shortly publish an update to “Working with Natural Processes—Evidence Directory”, which will provide access to information that explains the benefits of natural flood management. The Environment Agency is also working to develop a natural flood management benefits tool that aims to provide a nationally consistent way of assessing both flood risk and the wider benefits of NFM projects. In the past, one of the difficulties in getting these flood projects off the ground has been in calculating the benefit of NFM. If we can agree a consistent approach to how NFM will work, hopefully we can encourage more people to get involved with it. The Environment Agency plans to publish the high-level method and assumptions on which the tool is based soon, so watch this space.

Insurance has also been mentioned. I urge the hon. Member for North Norfolk to look at Build Back Better, because people who frequently have to claim on their insurance should be able to receive an extra £10,000 from their insurer through Build Back Better. If someone's insurer is not offering that, because they are in an area that is frequently flooded, their insurance is probably underwritten by Flood Re, and therefore they should be entitled to that.

**Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD):** Homes built since 2009 are excluded from the Flood Re insurance scheme, leaving many people without affordable insurance or indeed any insurance at all. When the Deputy Prime Minister talks about unlocking house building, the Minister will understand why my constituents are concerned that that means they will see more building on flood plains. Does the Minister agree that that would be farcical?

**Emma Hardy:** Well, no, because the Government are currently updating a lot of the planning rules for building homes. SUDS, which I mentioned earlier, will ensure that when building new homes, there is not increased flood risk either for the new homes being built or for existing homes in the area. That is why SUDS are so crucial.

Build Back Better should not just be available for people who have Flood Re; rather, it should be available for all insurers or people who are getting insurance. I want to make this mainstream. One of our concerns is that not many people know that they are able to claim this money or how to claim it. There are difficulties around some of the products, but the example that the hon. Member for North Norfolk shared—about why we would put plugs back in a low place when the property will get flooded again—is exactly where the Build Back Better money could be used: to put the plugs into a different place. I am more than happy to give more details on that.

We have mentioned the importance of mapping. I have good news. *[Interruption.]* Again, Sir Christopher, there is an outbreak of unity. The good news is that fairly soon we will launch something called NaFRA2, which is basically maps for the whole of England that look at the flood risk for all different types of flooding, including, for the first time, surface water flooding—previously, it has just been river and tidal. Importantly, it will look at future flood risk—so not only the risk of flooding right now, but how the flood risk will change according to climate change. That is incredibly important, so watch this space.

[Emma Hardy]

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato). She has met with me a few times, championing the needs of her constituents, and I know how welcome they will find her consistent lobbying. I hope that she will look at the flooding formula review and how it can impact areas such as Lowestoft or areas that have coastal erosion, and feed back to me on that.

I agree with the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) that if there was ever an issue that unites us, it is this—how good to hear that. I am quite interested in having a look at his Bill, and definitely at catchments as well. The independent review will have a look at catchments. It will look more at water quality but, of course, looking at a catchment solution helps with flooding. I will come back to internal drainage boards. I have been promised a culvert named after me if I do something good on this—

**James Wild:** Multiple!

**Emma Hardy:** Sorry, I have been promised multiple culverts. I have two challenges then: I need something named after me and I need to make maintenance sexy. This is indeed a good debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) talked about the importance of drainage boards. I spoke at the Association of Drainage Authorities conference recently, and I was pleased that my hon. Friend mentioned the £50 million we are giving to them. We recognise that they would have been unable to spend the £50 million by April, so we are splitting that money over two years, which is one of the things that the IDBs wanted to pursue. We are also looking at how internal drainage boards are funded—a piece of research is currently looking into that. I agree that they are incredibly important. I was interested to hear about the Welney Flood Watch team, which was a great example

of what volunteers can offer and how much they do in this space. A number of Members mentioned the importance of volunteers.

I have not been able to use the speech I wrote, but never mind. I would encourage people to please get in touch with their local area directors from the Environment Agency. If people give their personal phone number, I promise that they will not be spammed, but the agency will get in touch. If there is a flood, it is guaranteed to be at 8 pm on a Friday night, when people have had a glass of wine, so please pass that on and make sure that they can get in touch.

I want to reassure Members about funding. We are investing £2.4 billion over the next two years to improve flood resilience by maintaining as well as repairing and building flood defences—so maintaining is in there too. I reiterate that the Government are committed to delivering the oversight and long-term strategy needed to ensure that flood resilience is effectively delivered.

We have already taken decisive action by allocating additional funding for asset maintenance, as well as £50 million to internal drainage boards and £60 million to eligible farmers. The really good news for farmers is that the money should be arriving in many of their accounts tomorrow. That is a positive message to take away. We are taking the first steps to review the outdated funding formula and creating the new multi-agency flood resilience taskforce. I am afraid I do not have time to speak about the flood resilience taskforce, other than to say that many different agencies are involved in the taskforce to co-ordinate preparation ahead of the winter flood season.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered flood preparedness in Norfolk.

5.30 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*



# Written Statements

*Wednesday 20 November 2024*

## DEFENCE

### Defence Programme Developments

#### **The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):**

I have today made an oral statement setting out how our new Government are addressing the challenges facing UK defence. This written ministerial statement provides fuller detail about the decisions I have taken on certain defence programmes.

We face increasing global threats—war in Europe, growing Russian aggression, conflict in the middle east, and technology changing the nature of warfare. As a result, defence needs increased resilience and readiness for the future. We also face serious financial pressures in the defence budget. Our Government have taken immediate action, confirming an additional £2.9 billion for the defence budget in 2025-26 to help start fixing the foundations of UK defence. And we will set a clear path to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence.

To ensure that Britain is kept secure at home and strong abroad in a changing world, defence needs to make changes, too. Difficult decisions are required. As I set out in today's oral statement, this includes the retirement of ageing equipment as we transition to new capabilities and make our armed forces fit for the future. These decisions will deliver better value for money and ensure we are in a better position to modernise and strengthen UK defence.

I have halted the current refit of HMS Northumberland, a Type 23 frigate, which will now be retired from the fleet in March 2025. As a result of service well beyond the original Type 23 out-of-service date, the structural damage discovered during refit makes her uneconomical to repair. There will be no impact on current operations, and the ship's company has already been assigned elsewhere for the refit period. The Type 23 frigates will be replaced by the most advanced anti-submarine warfare frigates in the world: the Type 26, the first of which, HMS Glasgow, will be delivered by 2027.

HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, the Royal Navy's two amphibious assault ships, will be retired from service by the end of March 2025. Both are currently held at lower readiness, having not been to sea since 2023 and 2017 respectively. On current planning, neither was due to go to sea again before their planned out-of-service dates of 2033 and 2034. They had, in effect, been mothballed, but were still costing the taxpayer around £9 million per year to maintain. Almost all crew have been reassigned already, and the rest will be reassigned once the ships are retired. They will be replaced by planned multi-role support ships. In the meantime, the Commando Force will continue to be supported by the three Bay-class auxiliary landing ship docks and RFA Argus.

The Wave class auxiliary oilers, RFA Wave Knight and RFA Wave Ruler, will be retired from service by the end of March 2025. They have not been to sea since 2017 and 2022 respectively. They are currently in extended readiness and are not due to return to sea before their

planned out-of-service date in 2028. All crew have been reassigned already. The fleet's operations and training will be unaffected, with the more modern Tide-class auxiliary oilers fulfilling all requirements.

The Army's Watchkeeper Mk 1 uncrewed aerial system will be retired from service from March 2025. Watchkeeper Mk 1 was introduced in 2010. Since then, drone technology has advanced at a rapid rate, accelerated by prolific use throughout the war in Ukraine. A modern army must self-evidently have a modern drone capability, able to operate in the most challenging environments. Following the retirement of Watchkeeper Mk 1, the Army will rapidly switch to a new advanced capability, drawing on the most recent operational lessons and technological developments.

The Chinook helicopter has been a workhorse for the armed forces since it first entered service in the Royal Air Force in 1980. Over the years, it has been upgraded many times. Fourteen of the most modern variant, the highly capable H-47(ER), will enter service with the Royal Air Force from 2027. Ahead of this arrival, decommissioning of the oldest 14 aircraft will be accelerated as they reach their next deep maintenance period over the next four years. Current personnel will be unaffected and will continue to train, ready for the introduction of the H-47(ER).

The Puma helicopter has similarly served the Royal Air Force for a long time, having been first introduced in 1971 and extended several times. Puma will be retired in March 2025 when its current support contract expires. Pumas currently operate solely in Cyprus and Brunei, where they will be replaced by the new Airbus H-145 from 2026. During this short gap in capability, a commercial or military solution will be used for firefighting on our sovereign base in Cyprus, and alternatives to Brunei will be used for some elements of jungle training.

These ships and aircraft have provided a valuable capability over many years, but we must look to the future. I recognise that they will mean a lot to many who currently serve, and have served, with and in them during their deployments around the world. All personnel will be redeployed or retrained.

These are not the only difficult decisions we will need to make, as a new Government, to deal with the fiscal inheritance, but they are decisions which secure better value for money for taxpayers and better outcomes for our military. They are set to save the MOD up to £150 million in the next two years, and up to £500 million over five years—savings that will be retained in full in defence. My decisions are all backed by our military chiefs and taken in consultation with those leading the strategic defence review. Allies have been informed, and we have constant dialogue with NATO. I am announcing this now in order to maximise the associated savings, which will be invested back into defence.

[HCWS239]

## EDUCATION

### World Children's Day 2024

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** Today is World Children's Day, marking the 35th anniversary of the date that the UN adopted

the convention on the rights of the child, setting out the fundamental rights held by each and every child across the world.

This new Government will be a mission-led one, and one of our five missions is to break down the barriers to opportunity. The Government are determined to break the unfair link between background and success once and for all.

Our ambition is to create a society in Britain where the life chances of every child are front and centre and where every child and young person believes that success belongs to them.

We are taking swift action to improve the lives of every child. Our new policy statement, “Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive”, sets out ambitious proposals to fix children’s social care so that it provides help and protection to our most vulnerable children; and we will seek to legislate to enact these proposals when parliamentary time allows. Action on child poverty is being driven by our new Child Poverty Taskforce, which was established within weeks of the new Government taking power and is co-chaired by the Secretaries of State for Education and for Work and Pensions.

With the support of our stakeholders and by actively listening to children and young people, we are determined to deliver profound, lasting change for all children and young people, and particularly those from disadvantaged and deprived backgrounds. We will continue to place children at the heart of our ambitions.

[HCWS237]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Independent Review of the Physician and Anaesthesia Associate Professions

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):** The Government have commissioned Professor Gillian Leng CBE to lead an independent review into the physician and anaesthesia associate professions. This will consider how they are currently used and how they can be integrated safely into health teams to deliver the best possible care.

The review will consider the safety, cost-effectiveness and efficiency of roles, alongside the lessons that can be learned from how they have been deployed in the NHS. The conclusions of the review will inform future reforms, which will be vital to the delivery of the 10-year health plan. This review marks an important step: to reset the discussion by stepping back and taking stock of the evidence.

The review will report in spring 2025 and will gather the available evidence and data on the physician associate (PA) and anaesthesia associate (AA) professions from the UK and globally, engaging with these professionals, patients, the public, doctors and other professions, employers, and researchers. It will review the safety of the roles, patient experience, the contribution the roles can make to more productive use of professional time in multidisciplinary teams, and whether these roles deliver good quality, efficient and safe patient care in a range of settings.

PAs and AAs support doctors to manage patients, increasing the capacity of health care services and freeing up doctors to focus on specialist cases. The roles should always work under the supervision of a doctor, but concerns have been raised by the medical professional about blurred lines of responsibility and whether, in some cases, PAs and AAs are being used to replace doctors. The public has every right to be confident they are seeing the most appropriate healthcare professional.

Regulation of PAs and AAs by the General Medical Council will begin in December 2024 and will help to ensure all PAs and AAs meet the high standards we expect of every healthcare professional. However, we do not have a comprehensive view of how these roles are being deployed, or how effectively, and the review will address this gap. The conclusion will provide clarity to patients and healthcare professionals and inform our 10-year health plan.

Terms of reference for the review will be published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) in due course. Following completion of the review, we will publish our findings and update the House on next steps.

[HCWS236]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures:  
1 June to 31 August 2024

**The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis):** Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of their TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 31 August 2024)	2
Number of new TPIM notices served (during this period)	1
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 August 2024)	2
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices expired (during reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	0
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	1
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (during the reporting period)	2

The TPIM Review Group keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. TRG meetings were convened on 15 August 2024.

[HCWS234]

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures:  
1 March to 31 May 2024

**The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis):** Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 requires the Secretary of State to report to

Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of their TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 31 May 2024)	1
Number of new TPIM notices served (during this period)	0
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 May 2024)	1
TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)	1
TPIM notices expired (during reporting period)	0
TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)	0
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)	0
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (during the reporting period)	2

The TPIM Review Group keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. TRG meetings were convened on 13 and 22 May 2024.

[HCWS233]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Local Government Best Value

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** All hon. Members will recognise the importance of having well-functioning local councils that provide essential statutory services local residents rely upon. Government will continue to work directly with a small number of councils in difficulty, and this should be done in a way that is not punitive and is based on genuine partnership to secure improvements. Today, I would like to update the House on the statutory interventions in Slough and Woking.

#### *Slough Borough Council*

On 22 October 2024, I announced to the House that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), was minded to issue new directions to Slough borough council, and that I was seeking representations on a proposal. I also announced that if I implemented this proposal, I would reappoint the current three commissioners, and also appoint the interim chief executive, Will Tuckley, as managing director commissioner.

The proposal was to require the council to take actions that are consistent with the priorities that the commissioners have set for the council; provide for commissioners to continue to be able to exercise council functions relating to governance, finance and appointments; and to extend the timeframe of the statutory intervention until 30 November 2026. This followed the publication of the fifth report from commissioners, which, as I outlined on 22 October, provided evidence that there are still a substantial number of areas that require further improvement at the council, and there remains volatility in the council's overall financial position. In

my view, the report provides considerable evidence that the authority is not complying with its best value duty, as outlined in the Local Government Act 1999 and best value guidance published in May 2024.

Following consideration of the two representations that were received, and noting the support from the council for the proposal and the concerns raised about the pace and impact of the intervention to date, the Secretary of State and I have decided to implement the proposals announced on 22 October and issue new directions to the council, which come into effect immediately and will remain in force up to and including on 30 November 2026. The directions issued on 1 December 2021—updated on 1 September 2022 and 22 May 2023—are revoked with immediate effect.

I am therefore today confirming the reappointment of the current three commissioners, Gavin Jones, Denise Murray and Ged Curran. They will continue to work in partnership with the council to support its recovery. Alongside this, I have appointed Will Tuckley, the interim chief executive, as managing director commissioner. This will strengthen the relationship between the commissioner team and council and support the council to lead its recovery. The three reappointed commissioners have been nominated for the duration of the intervention and the managing director commissioner has been nominated for 18 months.

As with other interventions led by my Ministry, the council will be required to cover the costs associated with the commissioners. The fees for each individual are detailed in their appointment letters, published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk). I am assured this provides value for money given the expertise that is being brought, and the scale of the challenge in councils requiring statutory intervention.

#### *Woking Borough Council*

As the House will be aware, in May 2023, the former Secretary of State (the right hon. Michael Gove) announced a statutory intervention in Woking borough council, following evidence of extensive best value failure compiled in an external assurance review. The review detailed the exceptional level of financial and commercial risk to which the council had exposed itself, and concerns regarding the quality of its strategic financial decision making and its commercial dealings.

Historic commercial mismanagement and major governance failures led to Woking borough council accumulating an extraordinary level of debt, far exceeding usual levels of borrowing for a council of its size. This is an extreme position for a council to be in, and will require unprecedented support from Government to resolve. Woking clearly requires a significant programme of change to ensure it is operating to the required standard. I am grateful to the commissioners for working with the council to improve its strategic financial management and governance, and in charting a path to reduce Woking's debt as far as possible.

On 29 May 2024, the commissioners at Woking submitted their third report. I will be publishing this report, and my response, later today. It is clear from their report that Woking still faces significant challenges in its recovery, particularly regarding its financial position, but I am pleased that the council remains committed to working with commissioners to deliver fundamental change through its improvement and recovery plan. There are lots of



obstacles ahead, but I am confident that the commissioners and council have a good understanding of the challenge and are beginning to deliver a robust plan of improvement.

I also join the council in thanking their auditor Grant Thornton for their recent public interest report on Woking's historic investment practices, which the council will consider later today before issuing their formal response. The council has the full support of the commissioners in addressing the recommendations. I will also be reflecting on the public interest report and what lessons it can provide on the drivers of council failure.

I urge all councils to consider whether they could be doing more to ensure they are delivering the sound decision making that residents deserve, including considering the characteristics of a well-functioning authority as set out in best value guidance.

### *Conclusion*

The Government are committed to working in genuine partnership with councils under intervention to support their reset, reform and recovery, making sure residents have what they need from their local council, including confidence in its governance, financial management and service delivery. I will continue to monitor progress over the coming months and ensure these councils get the support they need to secure sustainable continuous improvement.

I will deposit in the House Library copies of the documents I have referred to, which are also being published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) today.

[HCWS235]

## **Social and Affordable Housing**

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** I am publishing today a consultation on reforms to the right to buy in England.

This Government are committed to the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation and to supporting councils to increase their capacity to build.

After more than a decade of marginalisation, we must once again assert the necessity and the value of social housing. It is a crucial national asset to be proud of, to invest in, to protect and to maintain.

We cannot achieve this while councils are losing homes quicker than they can replace them through the right to buy scheme. Nor can we achieve this while councils risk losing their investment in a newly built social home as soon as three years after completion. Between April 2012 and March 2024 there have been over 124,000 council right to buy sales, and in the same period fewer than 48,000 homes have been replaced.

Reduced access to affordable social rented homes has seen millions of low-income families forced into insecure, poor quality and unaffordable accommodation. Over 150,000 children are now in temporary accommodation and nearly 1.3 million people on social housing waiting lists. The cost of this has been borne not only by those low-income families unable to secure a social home, but by the taxpayer in the form of a rapidly rising housing benefit bill. This is unsustainable and represents a poor use of public money.

This Government remain committed to right to buy, which is why we are not proposing its abolition. It is an integral way for social tenants to get on the property ladder, many of whom may not otherwise be able to access home ownership. But crucially we also need to protect social housing stock to meet future housing need, to support councils to replace homes that are sold and to improve their confidence to scale-up delivery.

The scheme must be reformed so that it better protects the existing stock of social rented homes, provides better value for money for the taxpayer and ensures fairness within the system.

We have already taken significant steps to deliver this reform. In July, we increased the flexibilities on how councils can use the capital receipts generated by a right to buy sale to accelerate the delivery of replacement homes.

The Government, at autumn Budget, confirmed that councils will no longer be required to return a proportion of the capital receipt generated by the sale of the home to HM Treasury, which has totalled c.£183 million a year. This will ensure that councils are better able to build and acquire new council homes to meet local housing need.

The Government also confirmed at the autumn Budget the reduction of maximum right to buy cash discounts to their pre-2012 regional levels—ranging from £16,000 to £38,000—following a review conducted by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Secondary legislation was laid on 30 October and new discounts will come into force tomorrow. This is a crucial step in delivering a fairer, better value and more sustainable scheme. Reducing discounts will protect existing social housing stock, while ensuring long-term tenants can still benefit.

Through the same secondary legislation, we are increasing protections for newly built social homes from being sold under the right to buy, by increasing the “cost floor” period during which discounts can be reduced to account for money spent building or maintaining the property from 15 years to 30 years. This will give councils greater confidence to scale-up delivery of social homes for those who need them most.

But these measures are only part of the reform needed to achieve a fairer and more sustainable right to buy scheme. The eight-week consultation, which I am launching today, proposes the broader reforms necessary to ensure that the right to buy is sustainable and meets the needs of tenants who aspire to own their own homes, while also ensuring that the homes sold can be replaced. We are seeking views on:

Eligibility—we propose to increase the eligibility requirement (currently three years as a secure tenant) to support councils to rebuild the stock of council homes and to better ensure that long-term tenants who have lived in, and paid rent on, their social homes are able to own their home through the scheme.

Discounts as a percentage of the property value—we propose to amend the current percentage discounts to better align with the new cash discounts and propose that the same rules should apply to houses and flats.

Exemptions—we are seeking views on whether the current exemptions to the scheme are fit for purpose and whether new build homes should be exempt from the right to buy, for a given period, to better incentivise councils to invest in new

stock. We also welcome views on how to protect council investment in retrofitting and improving homes to a high standard.

Restrictions on properties after sale—once someone has purchased a home under the right to buy, it is theirs to live in and enjoy, the same as any home purchased on the open market. We do not therefore propose to introduce covenants to prevent homes being let out, which we think would be restrictive and too difficult for councils to administer. We are seeking views, however, on whether the time period in which the council has the right to ask for repayment of all or part of the discount received should be increased from five to ten years.

Requirements around the replacement of homes sold under the right to buy—we are seeking views on the benefits of replacement homes being for social rent to support the Government's ambition to increase the number of social rent homes and whether replacements should be, as far as possible, of the same size and in the same area.

Simplification of the receipts regime—we are seeking views on how the current system can be simplified and strengthened to support the replacement of homes.

Through this consultation, we will better understand what barriers there may be to the introduction of these proposals and to inform their design. Subject to views

in response to this consultation, we intend to bring forward legislation to implement any changes when parliamentary time allows.

I can also confirm today that the Government will not be extending the right to buy scheme to housing associations given the substantial costs to the taxpayer and the reduction in social housing stock that is likely to result. Eligible tenants will, however, continue to be able to buy their rented home at a discount, ranging from £9,000 to £16,000 depending on where their rented home is located, through the right to acquire scheme.

Further, I can confirm that the Government will not be taking forward the policy on the sale of higher-value assets proposed under the Housing and Planning Act 2016, which would have required councils to make a payment in respect of their vacant higher-value council homes and return some of the funds to the Government. The Government will repeal the provisions in the 2016 Housing and Planning Act when parliamentary time allows.

I look forward to continuing to work with all those with an interest in improving the system to make sure that these plans for reform are robust and deliverable.

[HCWS238]





# Petitions

Wednesday 20 November 2024

## OBSERVATIONS

### HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

#### Derriford Emergency Care Centre Plymouth

*The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,*

Declares that following the announcement of the New Hospital Programme Review, patients across South West Devon and across the South West are deeply concerned as to the future of University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust's new Urgent and Emergency Care Facility at Derriford; further declares that the new Urgent and Emergency Care Facility is essential for the NHS to be able to accommodate for the region's above-average population growth; further that the new facility will treat the sickest patients more quickly, avoid unnecessary admissions, facilitate early discharge and improve outcomes; and notes that UHP's former Member of Parliament had secured £180 million of government funding for the project.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider the resource needs of University Hospital Plymouth's new Urgent and Emergency Care Facility whilst undertaking the New Hospital Programme Review and retain the funding previously committed to this project.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rebecca Smith, Official Report, 28 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 641.]

[P003015]

*Observations from the Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):*

The Government understand the importance of delivering a new Derriford emergency care hospital, Plymouth for University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust and appreciate that it is an uncertain time for patients across the south-west.

We have confirmed that we are committed to delivering the New Hospital Programme (NHP), and the vital infrastructure it provides for staff and patients, but will put forward a realistic, affordable and deliverable plan.

The terms of reference for the review into the NHP were published on gov.uk on 20 September: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-hospital-programme-review-terms-of-reference> As confirmed by the publication, the Derriford emergency care hospital is in scope of the review.

The review has fed into decisions that were taken in the Budget and, as set out by the Chancellor on 30 October 2024, we will publish the outcome of

the review into the NHP in due course, alongside the new delivery schedule for the programme. This will allow patients, trusts and the local communities to understand when their much-needed new hospital will be delivered.

In the meantime, the Government continue to support the University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust with the development of their new hospital scheme. Up to the end of the 2023/24 financial year, the trust have received £25.2 million in funding for their NHP scheme.

### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

#### Dolphin Inn Grampound

*The petition of the residents of Grampound,*

Declares that the Dolphin Inn is an Asset of Community Value.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to lend support the Dolphin Inn Grampound, acknowledging that it furthers the social wellbeing and cultural, recreational and sporting interests of the local community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Noah Law, Official Report, 28 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 642.]

[P003013]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):*

The Government recognise the integral role of pubs in our communities. Pubs provide important spaces for the community to meet, socialise and access local services and we are keen to ensure that they are safeguarded.

The assets of community value scheme in England, introduced by the Localism Act 2011, currently provides communities with a route to nominate any building or land which furthers the social wellbeing or interest of the community. The decision on whether a nomination meets this definition is for local authorities, which must maintain a list of their decisions and are accountable to local people for these decisions. Local authorities are best placed to understand the issues affecting their area and determine what represents an asset of community value, and we cannot comment on specific disagreements.

However, the Government are working to ensure the listing process for assets of community value best serves the interests of communities across the country, including Grampound. Through the English devolution Bill, we plan to strengthen the current policy with the introduction of a new community right to buy to help local people to acquire valued community spaces, including pubs, if they come up for sale. This will help keep these assets in the hands of the community.



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**not later than  
Wednesday 27 November 2024**

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