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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 26 November 2024

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

UK Soft Power

1. **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help increase the UK's soft power. [901441]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): As these are the first departmental questions since the appointment of the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), I welcome the shadow Front-Bench team to their place.

Alongside the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), the Foreign Secretary is establishing a new soft power council to advise Government and shape a new strategy to increase UK soft power and enhance it to deliver our foreign policy objectives. Promoting all our soft power assets, including the British Council, the BBC World Service, scholarships and values, is crucial if we are to generate growth, security and global impact for the UK.

Fabian Hamilton: The Government's commitment to UK soft power was highlighted by the Chancellor's additional funding for the BBC World Service in the recent Budget. Last week, I met Moldovan MPs, who are on the frontline of Russian aggression. They really valued the British Council's presence, but it had to close owing to funding cuts. Does the Minister agree that it would be detrimental to Britain's place on the world stage if the British Council was forced to close more offices, particularly where British values of freedom and democracy are needed most?

Hamish Falconer: The Foreign Secretary has made it clear that the UK is committed to supporting Moldova's democratic choice to pursue a path of freedom, independence and European integration. The FCDO provided £511 million in grant in aid funding for the 2022 to 2025 spending review period. In an increasingly digital age, the British Council's impact should be judged by operational, rather than physical, presence. The council retains a physical presence in over 100 countries. Those in other countries still access cultural engagements and teaching activities online.

Mr Speaker: Let's take a new member of the Back Benches: Andrew Mitchell, on his return.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): May I wish the new shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), every success in her role? May I also wish the Minister and the entire Government foreign affairs team courage and wisdom as they deal with a world more dangerous than at any time in our lives? When it comes to soft power and development, I remind them of the importance of the words best articulated by former US Defence Secretary Mattis: "If you cut development spend, you have to order more ammunition."

Hamish Falconer: I pay tribute to the right hon. Member's long commitment to these issues. I returned last week from Pakistan where I was first deployed when he was the Secretary of State for International Development, so I know well his commitment to the issues over a long period.

I agree with the sentiments of the right hon. Member's question. The aid budget is incredibly important and makes a significant contribution to our national security right across the world. We continue to work hard to ensure that our aid budget is fit for purpose and does the job it needs to do on behalf of the UK right across the world.

Mr Speaker: I call a new member of the Front Bench: the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Whether it is the findings of the election monitors in Georgia, interference in the recent elections in Moldova, the illegal invasion of Ukraine, or the chill felt from the Baltics to Bucharest, Europe today is a much more contested space. This is the moment to pin our colours to the mast and be much more active in supporting those with Euro-Atlantic aspirations. How will the Minister build on the efforts of the last Government and use our considerable soft power to be much more proactive?

Hamish Falconer: We continue to engage heavily on those issues—the Foreign Secretary was in Moldova last week. We are committed to enhancing the UK's soft power after a period of decline, and that is why the Foreign Secretary will be launching the soft power council with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport in the coming weeks.

Israeli Settler Violence: Sanctions

2. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of sanctioning violent illegal Israeli settlers. [901442]

10. **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Whether he plans to extend existing sanctions in response to settler violence in the west bank to Israeli Ministers. [901450]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): Palestinian communities have suffered horrific violence at the hands of Israeli settlers. In October, the Government sanctioned three outposts and four entities linked to violence in the west bank. I will not speculate about future sanctions

designations—doing so would only reduce their impact—but we continue to explore all options to take tougher action.

Clive Jones: Settlement expansion in the Occupied Palestinian Territories remains one of the biggest barriers to peace in the middle east. In October the Foreign Secretary said:

“As long as violent extremists remain unaccountable, the UK and the international community will continue to act.”

Will he commit today to considering sanctions against the extremist Ministers Ben-Gvir and Smotrich of the Israeli Government?

Mr Lammy: I have been very clear in office. In October, I targeted the Amana settler group, which operates as a commercial construction company, and I was pleased that the US followed us in those sanctions just last week. I was also concerned about a religious school promoting violence against Jews, and I sanctioned it. A non-governmental organisation provided volunteers for illegal outposts, and I sanctioned it. Of course we continue to keep sanctions policy under consideration. We are very concerned by the violence, by the expansion, and by the rhetoric that we are hearing from members of the Israeli Government.

Mr Betts: I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend's answer. He said that he will not speculate on future sanctions, but the two Israeli Ministers named are encouraging settler violence and have called for the annexation of the west bank by Israel. Does my right hon. Friend accept that, even if he will not talk about further sanctions today, he can recognise that the threat of annexation is real, and that until we come out clearly in support of an independent Palestinian state, the settlers will continue their violence in the belief that they will eventually achieve the annexation that they want?

Mr Lammy: I commend my hon. Friend for standing up on those issues. Let me be absolutely clear: annexation would be illegal and we would stand opposed to it. I make that fundamentally clear. He should be assured that we will continue to speak out both against illegal violence against settlers and against settler expansion.

Mr Tom Morrison (Cheadle) (LD): International law is vital for us to build a platform for a more secure and peaceful world. Do the Government recognise and support the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction, and will they co-operate fully with the Court to ensure that it can carry out its work without obstruction?

Mr Lammy: Yes, 100%.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I will also ask my right hon. Friend about Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, and perhaps if I ask in a different way, we might get an answer. Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton tells us that before the last general election, the Foreign Office was working up potential sanctions against those two most controversial and infamous settlers and Ministers. I appreciate that sanctions are kept under

review, but is my right hon. Friend in a position to tell us when a decision might be made, or if one has already been made, about those Ministers?

Mr Lammy: I think the previous Foreign Secretary was wrong to talk about sanctions under consideration—particularly to talk about sanctions that he said were under consideration but then did not implement. I will not get drawn on sanctions policy at the Dispatch Box, but I am pleased that my right hon. Friend is raising issues of such importance. Anyone looking can see the strength of feeling in the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The comments last week by Finance Minister Smotrich advocating the annexation of the west bank, together with the continuing devastation in northern Gaza, have reinforced the idea that elements of the Israeli Cabinet have no interest in a two-state solution. There is now a real and imminent risk that the extremists in the Israeli Cabinet will succeed in annexing Palestinian territories before any negotiations can take place. In the light of that, does the Foreign Secretary agree that now is the time to recognise Palestine?

Mr Lammy: Yesterday at the G7 meeting in Rome, Foreign Ministers discussed that very issue. We were united—all of us—in condemning any suggestion of annexation. We would stand against it.

Official Development Assistance

3. **Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP):** If he will increase the amount and proportion of official development assistance allocated to humanitarian projects. [901443]

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): The Government are determined to rebuild the UK's reputation on international development. We have announced a doubling of support for people hit by the humanitarian emergency in Sudan, as well as providing support for people in Gaza, in Lebanon and in other crisis situations.

Chris Law: The Government's insistence on continuing to implement the Tories' deep and damaging cuts to the aid budget and unprecedented levels of ODA spending on in-donor refugee costs is resulting in reductions, pauses and cancellations of overseas ODA projects.

Anneliese Dodds indicated dissent.

Chris Law: I see that the Minister is shaking her head; I look forward to her response. Does she recognise that the UK Government cannot say they are back on the global stage while these Boris Johnson-inspired policies continue to cut deep into our development policy?

Anneliese Dodds: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that our programme budget for the FCDO in 2025-26 will actually be at its highest level in recent years. We are able to deliver that because this Government are taking action on the issues that the previous Government did not tackle, in particular the in-donor refugee costs that have eaten into that budget. We just saw gimmicks; we did not see action. Instead, the new Government are taking action.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): The humanitarian crisis in Sudan is horrific, and it is clear that rape is being used as a weapon of war. Recent data from Médecins Sans Frontières highlights that 90% of sexual violence survivors in a hospital in Chad were abused by armed perpetrators, and 50% were attacked in their homes. This is happening in 2024. Can the Foreign Secretary provide details on how the UK's recent pledges on humanitarian aid for Sudan and the region are being used to support survivors of sexual and gender-based violence?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that incredibly concerning situation. The UK has been determined to do all that it can, particularly in relation to conflict-related sexual violence. In October 2024, it was the UK that led moves to secure the renewal of the mandate of the fact-finding mission at the United Nations Human Rights Council. As was just mentioned, we recently doubled humanitarian aid, and the Foreign Secretary also led efforts at the UN Security Council to take action on the humanitarian emergency in Sudan.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the shadow Minister.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): The Government appear to be in a complete tailspin over whether they will release the costs that will fall to the British taxpayer as a result of the rushed deal to give away the British Chagos islands. Given the reported trip to Mauritius by the special envoy, Jonathan Powell, can the Minister at least confirm today which budget the costs will come from, including whether they intend to use the aid budget? Will she tell the House how much it will cost each year and in total, and if the British Chagossians will actually have a genuine say? Would it not make more sense to keep these strategically important islands under the Crown, rather than the secretive deal negotiated? No deal is better than a bad deal.

Anneliese Dodds: My understanding is that there were actually 10 rounds of negotiations under the Conservatives, but we did not see the UK reaching the necessary agreements. This is a frankly bizarre argument coming from the Opposition. All the details of the situation are in the public domain, and quite rightly so. This is part of the UK ensuring that we follow international law.

Release of Alaa Abd el-Fattah

4. Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on helping to secure the release of Alaa Abd el-Fattah. [901444]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): We are committed to securing consular access and the release of Mr el-Fattah. We continue to raise Mr el-Fattah's case at the highest levels with the Egyptian Government. The Prime Minister raised this with President Sisi on 8 August, and I last raised it with the Egyptian Foreign Minister yesterday.

Brian Leishman: I thank the Foreign Secretary for his answer. Alaa Abd el-Fattah's mother, Laila Soueif, is in the Gallery today on the 58th day of her hunger strike in protest at the continued imprisonment of her son, a

British citizen, whose prison sentence in Egypt ended in September. I am sure that the Foreign Secretary feels the same as me and understands that Laila wants to know that her Government are doing everything they can to bring her son home. Will the Foreign Secretary guarantee that the UK Government will put a hold on any new economic or financial partnerships with Egypt unless and until British national Alaa Abd el-Fattah is freed?

Mr Lammy: I look forward to meeting Mr el-Fattah's mother later on today. I reassure my hon. Friend personally that I share his determination and resolve to see Alaa reunited with his family, and I think their love and dedication to him is obvious to many parliamentarians whom they have met and campaigned with. My hon. Friend will understand that with the terrible situation in Gaza, it is important that this Government continue to speak to our Egyptian friends, who obviously have real proximity to Gaza. I understand the strength of feeling, and that is why the Prime Minister has raised this and I have raised this on successive occasions. Alaa is a dual national, and we will continue to lobby on his behalf.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I fully support the call for Mr el-Fattah's release, but in the same area, Ryan Cornelius has spent 16 years illegally held by the United Arab Emirates, much of it in solitary confinement. The Secretary of State says that he will pursue these cases rigorously, but when he went to the UAE recently, he did not raise the case of Ryan Cornelius.

Mr Lammy: I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the situation of Ryan Cornelius has been raised with the UAE, and officials continue to provide consular access to Mr Cornelius and Mr Ridley and are in contact with their families at this time. It is a serious case; we are absolutely aware of it, and the UAE knows that we are very concerned.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I completely understand and appreciate what the Foreign Secretary has said about maintaining a relationship with Egypt because of the issue in Gaza, but the reality is that Mr el-Fattah's family has suffered enough, and President Sisi will move only if there is an economic threat. Therefore, after the Foreign Secretary meets the family tomorrow, can I ask him to contact the President's office to make absolutely clear that our economic relationship will suffer unless this British citizen is released?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman should be reassured that I spoke to the Egyptian Foreign Minister yesterday and said to him that I was meeting Mrs el-Fattah today. I urged him to look at what parliamentarians are saying about this case, which is of huge concern, and pressed him to do more. We have continued to do that with the Egyptians. It is obviously sensitive because of the situation in Gaza, but I do not think the Egyptians are in any doubt about how seriously this case is taken by the British system, the Government and this Parliament.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The all-party parliamentary group on arbitrary detention and hostage affairs has been hearing evidence from UK nationals who are being, or have been, detained. We were privileged to hear from Alaa's mother just this

morning. An oft-repeated concern is that if a UK national finds themselves in that awful situation, they are essentially on their own compared with other nationals. Does the Minister recognise that depiction, and if he does not, what can he point to as a unique advantage of having a British passport for someone who finds themselves arbitrarily detained?

Mr Lammy: I recognise that the hon. Gentleman has got some problem with having a British passport, but I have no such problem. I am proud to be a citizen of this great country, and we have some outstanding diplomats and officials in the FCDO. Of course, we recognised in opposition that there are issues in this area, which is why we have said that we will introduce a special representative to work with hostage families.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Alaa's friends and family, whom I have the privilege of representing as my constituents, just want their brother, uncle and son home safe. Previously, the Foreign Secretary—who has worked hard on this issue and, as he says, has raised it with the Egyptians—has talked about what we could do if the Egyptians will not restore consular access. They still have not done that, so could the Foreign Secretary update us? I know this House speaks as one in standing and demanding that Alaa be freed and able to come home to his family for this Christmas, but what more can and will the Foreign Secretary do if the Egyptians will not restore consular access for the family?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend has campaigned diligently on the family's behalf. She will know that the Egyptians do not accept Mr el-Fattah's dual nationality—that is an issue between us—and it is for that reason that they deny consular access. Currently, access is through Mr el-Fattah's lawyer. I am urging the Egyptians to understand that he got his citizenship in the usual way, just like other members of his family. There was no conspiracy on the part of the state in the way that Mr el-Fattah got that citizenship, and I continue to press them on that very issue, which would allow him to have the consular access that he deserves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and commend the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) for raising the matter, but it is not the only case: the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) referred to another case, and I would add Jimmy Lai as a third. The UK and British passport must mean something. With that in mind, is it not time to set aside a specific section in the FCDO that looks at these cases and is tasked with getting our British citizens back home to this United Kingdom?

Mr Lammy: As the hon. Gentleman mentions Jimmy Lai, let me say once again that we call on the Hong Kong authorities to release immediately British national Jimmy Lai, who is a significant priority for this Government. That is why the Prime Minister raised the matter with the President of China last week and I raised it with the Foreign Minister of China. The hon. Gentleman is right: this does need a close look by the new Government. We are just over four months old, we are looking at it and we will come forward with proposals shortly.

Hostages in Gaza

5. John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking with his international counterparts to help secure the release of hostages held by Hamas in Gaza. [901445]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): Ensuring the safe release of all hostages, including British national Emily Damari and three other hostages with strong UK links, remains a top priority for this Government. We support the efforts of negotiators and call on the parties to return to negotiations. We continue to work alongside allies and partners in the region towards securing hostage releases. Negotiations remain the best chance to get hostages, cruelly detained by Hamas, home to their loved ones. I relayed these points to the Israeli deputy Foreign Minister yesterday.

John Lamont: The horrors endured by the 97 Israelis and foreign nationals held hostage by Hamas terrorists in Gaza for over 13 months are unthinkable. Given that the efforts to secure their release have not yet been successful, what further steps is the United Kingdom taking to bring home Emily Damari, a 28-year-old British citizen, and the rest of the captives?

Hamish Falconer: I am sure that the whole House will join me in saying to those families that we, as a House and a Government, will do absolutely everything we can. The horrors of being a hostage family are unbearable, and we have them in our mind each and every day. We are disappointed that talks to secure hostage releases appear to have stalled for the moment. We are urging all parties to return to the table. A deal remains the best prospect and we hope to work with our allies to see that come through.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): On Friday, on account of a negative vote cast by a permanent member, the Security Council failed to adopt a text put forward by its 10 elected members calling for an immediate, unconditional and permanent ceasefire in Gaza and demanding the release of all hostages. That is extremely disappointing, as it condemns thousands of people in the middle east to ongoing conflict and moves no further forward to securing the release of the hostages held by Hamas in Gaza, although I and many of my constituents welcome the fact that the UK voted for that resolution. What will the Minister's next steps be in achieving greater global agreement on securing peace, a ceasefire and the release of the hostages?

Hamish Falconer: This Government will continue to do everything we can to press for a ceasefire, the release of all hostages and a reduction in violence in the middle east. The Foreign Secretary discussed these matters in the G7 and I discussed them with my Israeli counterpart yesterday, and we will continue to take all steps across a wide range of different conversations to try to advance the ceasefire that we so desperately need.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Last week, I spoke with Mandy Damari. The Minister has mentioned Emily, and I know the Foreign Secretary and his team have been in touch with the family as well. She and many

other hostage families are going through the most unimaginable suffering, so can the Minister, on behalf of the Foreign Secretary, confirm whether any aid organisations have had humanitarian access to the hostages, and if not, what pressure is being exerted on those agencies? Clearly, welfare concerns are paramount, but these poor families are also suffering unimaginable horrors and our aid budget needs to be spent in the right way, so can the Minister tell us what work is being undertaken?

Hamish Falconer: Regrettably, no organisation has had access to the hostages. We continue to call for access for the International Committee of the Red Cross and any other appropriate non-governmental organisation in the usual way. Let us be clear: Hamas hold these hostages, and they are behaving abominably and outwith any international norm. They are not abiding by any convention that we could think of. We will continue to press them to ensure that there is the required access to British nationals, but it is regrettable for the whole House that we are in this position.

EU Security and Defence Co-operation

6. **James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on security and defence co-operation. [901446]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The Foreign Secretary attended the EU Foreign Affairs Council on 14 October. In the margins, he agreed with Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for foreign affairs, to work towards a security partnership and committed to six-monthly foreign policy dialogues, starting in early 2025. Yesterday, I met Secretary-General Sannino of the European External Action Service to discuss, alongside ministerial colleagues, some of our vital shared interests, including Ukraine, hybrid threats and the western Balkans.

James MacCleary: President-elect Trump's confirmation of tariffs on Canada, one of the US's closest allies, raises serious concerns about his willingness to honour the US-UK special relationship. If that is the future of US relations with its closest partners, does the Minister agree that closer co-operation with the EU on defence and trade is now urgently needed, including access to the European customs union and the defence pact with the EU, going beyond the recent agreement with Germany?

Stephen Doughty: We have a thriving trading and investment relationship with the United States, with more than 1 million British citizens working for US firms, and vice versa. We look forward to working with President-elect Trump in office, including on his policy priorities and to improve our trading relations. Our need to work together in Europe on security issues is clear to all Members, whether that is the threat from Russia, the war in Ukraine, hybrid threats, the situation in Moldova or the situation in the western Balkans, and that is exactly what we are getting on with and doing.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I very much welcome the recent announcement of the UK-Germany bilateral defence agreement, which was signed at record-breaking pace by the new Government at Trinity House last

month. It will bolster closer working with Europe's largest economy on wider defence and security matters at a time of increasing Russian aggression across Europe. With that in mind, can the Minister therefore explain to the House how the Trinity House agreement fits into wider discussions with EU and NATO counterparts around defence and security?

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks on that important treaty work; I know he takes a keen interest in matters relating to UK-German relations. We continue to engage with German colleagues from across the spectrum. We are keen to get this treaty agreed as soon as possible. For me, it naturally fits with our NATO membership and the new enhanced dialogue we have with the EU on security and defence matters.

Middle East: Humanitarian Situation

7. **Steve Witherden** (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in the middle east. [901447]

9. **David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve the humanitarian situation in the middle east. [901449]

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): The humanitarian situation in Gaza is catastrophic. The UK's recent vote for the UN Security Council resolution on Gaza has already been mentioned. It called for a huge scale-up in aid across Gaza. We need that aid access, and restrictions on aid are unacceptable.

Steve Witherden: The International Development Committee heard testimony from Nizam Mamode, a surgeon who has recently returned from the Nasser hospital in Gaza. He described Israeli drones picking off injured children after bombings. His account echoed an October *New York Times* report, which cited 44 doctors, nurses and paramedics who witnessed numerous cases of pre-pubescent children being shot in the head or chest during the ongoing conflict in Gaza. What steps are the Government taking to prevent a genocide in Gaza?

Anneliese Dodds: We have heard a number of deeply concerning reports about developments in Gaza. I know that has also been the case for the Select Committee, as my hon. Friend mentioned. The UK Government's position could not be clearer: international law, including international humanitarian law, must be held to, and that covers in particular the operations of healthcare workers. We pay tribute to them operating in such difficult circumstances.

David Smith: As we have been hearing, the situation in Gaza—especially northern Gaza—is dire, with the UN anticipating that this year up to 60,000 children under the age of five could be facing acute malnutrition. At the same time, the trucks entering Gaza have reduced by 63% since October 2023. I welcome the leading role that the Government are taking in providing vital humanitarian aid for Gaza, but does the Minister agree that the ongoing Israeli restrictions on the flow of essential aid are completely unacceptable and should be lifted immediately?

Anneliese Dodds: Yes. We are seeing a disturbing impact from those restrictions; we have seen it in the famine assessment and in the levels of malnutrition and ill health now prevalent in Gaza. Winter is now upon us, making the situation even worse. The restrictions on aid are unacceptable. They must be lifted immediately.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): When the Foreign Secretary was in Baku recently for COP29, did he discuss with his interlocutors across the region the extent to which the global finance goals would impact on humanitarian assistance in the middle east?

Anneliese Dodds: Yes, the Foreign Secretary did discuss those matters, including directly with Mia Mottley, the Premier of Barbados, who has been leading many of the small island developing states on these issues. Certainly, the UK is determined to play its part on humanitarian issues as well as globally on climate issues. That is so important for our own country as well as for the rest of the world.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Some weeks ago, I asked the Foreign Secretary about getting assurances that children receiving polio vaccinations would not be killed after receiving them. Since then, thousands of children have been killed in northern Gaza. Given the ICC's recent ruling about war crimes, the British public no doubt want to know why the Government are shying away from their legal and moral obligation to ban all arms and all trade.

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government have been determined to use every mechanism to advance international humanitarian law. That includes within the UN Security Council, as we just discussed, but we have also been taking action at every bilateral and multilateral opportunity, including on polio, where the UK led efforts to get vaccination going in the first place.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the International Development Committee.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): In October, the Israeli Knesset passed two laws relating to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency: the law for cessation of UNRWA activities in the state of Israel; and the law for cessation of UNRWA activities. They will take effect on 28 January, and the consequence will be preventing aid distribution in Gaza and the prevention of primary care, education and refuse collection in the west bank.

Last week, my Committee was in Palestine and Jordan. There is huge concern that if that legislation takes effect, it will breach numerous international laws and have a catastrophic effect on the humanitarian and security situation in the region. What conversations have Ministers had with their Israeli counterparts to prevent that implementation, and what are they doing with the international community to protect a UN organisation?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that and to her Committee for its work on this important issue. The UK Government have been absolutely

clear that UNRWA is the only agency that can deliver aid at the scale and depth required in the middle of this humanitarian emergency.

My hon. Friend asked about representations being made by the UK Government. I have made those representations myself, including at the UN General Assembly. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Hamish Falconer), made those representations yesterday. The Foreign Secretary has made them a number of times, including to his Israeli counterpart. It is clear that the restrictions on the operation of UNRWA must not be implemented by the Israeli Government.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The humanitarian situation in the middle east is made worse by arms supply from within and beyond the region. The Liberal Democrats have a long-standing policy that the UK Government should not be exporting arms to Israel or to the Occupied Palestinian Territories given that they were referred to in the FCDO's last human rights report. Will the FCDO extend the number of arms export licences denied to Israel by the UK?

Anneliese Dodds: I gently encourage the hon. Member to look at the action taken by the UK Government some weeks ago to suspend a number of arms licences. We believe that was important because of the risk towards breaking international humanitarian law. The UK Government take their responsibilities in that regard very seriously indeed.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The root cause of so much of the terrible humanitarian suffering in the middle east today is the regime in Tehran, fuelling the Houthis, Hamas and Hezbollah and brutally repressing its own people while bailing out Putin's war machine, and even plotting to assassinate individuals based in the UK. Beyond sanctions with Iran—which we all support and successive Governments have put in place over the years—can the Minister tell us, on behalf of the Foreign Secretary, what exactly is the comprehensive plan to start dealing with this repressive regime that is causing so much brutality across the middle east?

Anneliese Dodds: We are deeply concerned about the destabilising impact of the Iranian regime within the region and beyond. The right hon. Lady mentioned a number of cases where we can see that impact clearly. I would also underline that the truly devastating humanitarian crisis in Yemen is very much connected to Iranian backing of the Houthis. We have repeatedly raised our concerns about this bilaterally and multilaterally. We are clear that we need a strong voice as a UK Government on these matters, and that is exactly what we are delivering.

ECHO 2 Programme

8. **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): What recent steps his Department has taken to deliver the ECHO 2 programme. [901448]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): The ECHO 2 telephone contract for telephones in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is 79% completed, but is on track for completion in

January 2025. Ministers and officials have been working day and night to fix the procurement mistakes of the previous Government.

Edward Morello: The ECHO 2 programme is crucial to delivering the new global communications network for the FCDO. The Minister mentioned that it is due for completion in January 2025, but will it remain within budget? What are the plans to ensure that it delivers its full technical and financial benefits? Does the Minister think that any additional support or adjustments will be needed to ensure its delivery?

Catherine West: With increased scrutiny and hard-working Ministers and officials, we will reach all targets. I will write to the hon. Gentleman with more details on his specific question.

Leadership on Climate Change

11. **Chris Curtis** (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to demonstrate leadership on climate change. [901451]

14. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to demonstrate leadership on climate change. [901454]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): I was proud to join Ministers across Government to show UK leadership on the climate and nature crisis at COP29. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced our ambitious 2035 emissions reduction target, and I reaffirmed our commitment to the global south through £11.6 billion in climate finance.

Chris Curtis: At COP29, under a Labour Government the UK reclaimed its position as a global leader on climate action. We recognise now that our security and prosperity hinge on addressing the crisis. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the progress made on climate finance, while acknowledging that there is much more to do to keep us on track on that road map and to keep 1.5° alive?

Mr Lammy: It was important that our Prime Minister was the only G7 Prime Minister to attend COP. My hon. Friend will recall that, last year, the Prime Minister at the time did not attend. It is hugely important that we reach the £300 billion for climate finance, which will help the global south get to clean energy. We hope that our global clean power alliance will be able to work with them, as they now have the money to do it.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: The world's forests are the lungs of the earth, but we are losing them at an alarming rate. An area the size of Azerbaijan, where COP29 was hosted, is destroyed every year. Will the Foreign Secretary explain what the Government are doing to preserve the world's forests and to support those who protect them?

Mr Lammy: I was very pleased to speak at COP on the issue of forests and to join inspirational indigenous leaders on that subject. That is why we found £3 billion for nature, of which £1.5 billion is dedicated to work on forests.

Georgia Elections

12. **Blair McDougall** (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Whether he has made representations to his counterpart in Georgia on reported irregularities in parliamentary elections held in that country on 26 October 2024. [901452]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): Ahead of the elections on 11 October, I expressed my concerns directly to Foreign Minister Darchiashvili about pressure on civil society and stigmatisation of minorities ahead of the parliamentary elections. Following the elections, I publicly expressed support for the preliminary findings of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in relation to the election. I called on the Georgian authorities to investigate all irregularities and reverse their declining commitment to an inclusive and open democracy.

Blair McDougall: I thank the Minister for his actions. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and to the work I have done in the past with democratic activists in Georgia. Those activists are terrified that Georgia is now at a turning point. Will the Minister join me in calling for new elections under international oversight and an end to the attacks on civil society groups, especially the heroic LGBT groups who are under attack there? If those things do not take place, will the Government keep open the option of sanctions on the individuals who are responsible for democratic backsliding in Georgia?

Stephen Doughty: I recognise my hon. Friend's long-standing interest in this issue and his strong views on it. Let me be clear. On 28 October, His Majesty's ambassador to Georgia called on the Central Election Commission to transparently investigate all alleged incidences of election fraud. Following the session of the new Parliament, the embassy again reiterated our concerns about election violations and the need for independent investigation. He is absolutely right that the right to peaceful protest and a free civil society is a key attribute of any modern European democracy and must be respected. We will continue to make that clear.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): I first pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall), whose focus on Georgia—not just on free elections in Georgia, but on the spread of Putin's evil influence across Europe—has been incredibly important. What actions is the Minister taking to push back on Russia's influence in the region and to push back in Russia itself using his budget for the BBC World Service to broadcast in sub-national languages inside Russia, so that the people of Russia know what is being done in their name and can understand what Putin is doing to them?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point to the important work the BBC World Service does in this area, in particular through its language services. I have in the past met its fantastic staff who do that important work. It is important that people have access to free, accurate and impartial information, including in their own languages. We have been clear about the extent of Russian interference in

Georgia for a long time and we are clear about Russian interference across Europe in democracies. That is why we are working so closely with NATO and EU partners on that very issue.

Relations with the US

13. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What steps he plans to take to help strengthen relations with the US. [901453]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): The United States is an indispensable ally and I am committed to the depth and breadth of the UK-US relationship. The Prime Minister and I met President-elect Trump in September for dinner, which was a good opportunity to get to know each other. We of course continue to work with the current Administration. I was with Tony Blinken just yesterday.

Jerome Mayhew: Defence spending is a key aspect of our relationship with the United States. Will the Foreign Secretary be able to tell our American allies the date on which we will increase defence spending to 2.5%? If he cannot, what influence will we have on European allies to increase their defence spending?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of defence spending. It has been raised by US Presidents since Eisenhower. He is right that when Donald Trump came to power there were just four European countries spending above 2%. When Labour left government it was at 2.5%. We are sad that it dropped and we are determined to get it back to 2.5% of GDP.

Topical Questions

T1. [901466] **Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): In the past month, growth was at the heart of my visit to Africa. We agreed work on a new global plan in South Africa and a new strategic partnership with Nigeria. During our UN Security Council presidency we have shown support for Ukraine 1,000 days into the war and pressed for a lasting peace in the middle east, and I condemned Russia's shameful veto of a resolution on Sudan. Finally, throughout COP we have been restoring British leadership on climate.

Mr Holden: Since coming into office, the Government have suspended arms export licences to Israel; rolled over on the International Criminal Court, with nothing new against Hamas terrorists; and poured cash into the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, despite concerns over a significant number of its staff double-hatting with Hamas. Many of those things have been published in Arabic on the UK Government's website. Who decides what should be published in Arabic? Why are they being published in Arabic? As they relate to Israel, why is nothing being published in Hebrew?

Mr Lammy: The art of diplomacy is speaking to foreign leaders and foreign nations as best we can in the UK's national interest. That does sometimes involve foreign languages, which is why, for example, we support the BBC World Service. It was a slightly bizarre question.

T2. [901468] **Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): We can all agree that ending human trafficking across the English channel requires an approach that is co-ordinated with that of all the countries from which people are being trafficked. Can the Foreign Secretary assure the House that the French Government share our commitment to smashing the gangs and ending these crossings?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that I met the French Foreign Minister in London just last week, when we discussed these issues and agreed to co-ordinate better, and that the Home Secretary is working closely with the new French Interior Minister.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The relationship that the Government are building with China appears to be all give and no take. In order to convince the House that the situation is different, can the Foreign Secretary tell us what has been achieved with regard to advancing Britain's interests in respect of security, economic practices and human rights since his recent visits to China, and what he expects to be achieved during his future visits?

Mr Lammy: I welcome the right hon. Lady to her place, and also remind her that under the last Government there were about seven different China policies and very little was achieved. We have had four and a half months. I was very pleased to be in China discussing issues on which we disagree, on which we agree and on which we challenge China, and I will continue to do that over the coming months and years.

Priti Patel: In the light of that response, can the Foreign Secretary state categorically whether, as part of his conversations with Chinese counterparts, the UK Government have explicitly called for the repeal of the national security law in Hong Kong, whether he has specifically called for Jimmy Lai be released, and whether he will ensure that no deals—such as China's application for a new embassy—can go ahead until Jimmy Lai is free?

Mr Lammy: I thank the right hon. Lady for raising the situation in Hong Kong, which formed a substantial part of our conversation. Of course we raised issues relating to Jimmy Lai—as I have said in the House before—and the security law in Hong Kong. There are disagreements between us, and we were very clear about that. The right hon. Lady can be sure that matters involving both our representation in this country and China's representation will pass through our system in the usual way without Government interference.

T4. [901470] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): It is nearly eight months since an attack by the Israel Defence Forces on a World Central Kitchen convoy killed seven aid workers, including three Britons: James Henderson, John Chapman and James Kirby. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that their families deserve to see accountability and justice for their deaths?

Mr Lammy: It was very important for me to meet the families of those people a few weeks ago. The killing of seven World Central Kitchen aid workers, including those British nationals, in an Israeli airstrike on Gaza on 1 April was appalling, and a matter of great concern. We continue to urge the Military Advocate General in Israel to proceed with a proper investigation and inquiry, and to get on with it as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's announcement that the UK will sanction Russia's so-called shadow fleet, but I understand that the UK has not levied a single fine for breach of the existing sanctions on Russia's oil. Will the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor now take more robust action to ensure that UK sanctions are complied with?

Mr Lammy: I was very pleased to see President Zelensky recognise just yesterday the UK's leadership in challenging the shadow fleet. As the hon. Gentleman will know, I have made this part of my personal mission, and it has involved a record number of oil tankers. We are leading the world in sanctioning the shadow fleet. As the hon. Gentleman says, there are enforcement issues, which is why we have instigated a review.

T5. [901471] **Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): When I met the Ukrainian ambassador to the United Kingdom, General Zaluzhnyi, last month he raised the importance of ensuring that Ukrainian children and young people who have been forced to flee this terrible conflict in their own country receive the support and education that they need, so that they can be the generation that rebuilds Ukraine. What conversations has the Foreign Secretary had with the Ukrainian Government and his ministerial colleagues to ensure that that happens?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend raises a very important issue. A few months ago, I met Ukrainian children who had been taken to Russia and who had fortunately been brought back to Ukraine by a non-governmental organisation that we were supporting. We have increased our funds for that important work, both in Ukraine and in Moldova, where I was last week.

T3. [901469] **James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): The EU has been very clear that it would welcome a new youth mobility scheme with the UK. As the Minister knows, that would not be a return to freedom of movement and could be agreed separately from the trade and co-operation agreement that the UK signed when we left the UK. Can the Minister tell me, this House and the young people of this country why the Government will not sit down with European allies to agree a new youth mobility scheme?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): My colleagues in the Cabinet Office, me, the Foreign Secretary and others are engaged in a number of conversations with our EU counterparts, but I will not give a running commentary. We will look at EU proposals on a range of issues, but there are no plans for a youth mobility scheme; neither will we return to freedom of movement.

T6. [901472] **Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): It is vital that we continue to supply Ukraine with aid in the face of Russian aggression. Is that aid combined with diplomatic efforts to bring about a just and lasting peace, in line with UN conventions?

Stephen Doughty: Our support is absolute and resolute. I am happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss these issues further. We will maintain our position.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary take every opportunity to impress on the incoming President the importance of the article 5 guarantee, whereby the United States will come to the aid of any NATO country that is attacked? Will he impress on President Trump that we will do everything that we can to encourage other NATO allies to contribute more to the cost of defence?

Mr Lammy: Yes, yes, yes and more yes. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for highlighting this very important issue. The NATO alliance is the strongest and best alliance that the modern world has seen, and the UK will continue to impress that point on anyone who will listen.

T7. [901473] **Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Given the upcoming audit into the UK's relationship with China, how does the Foreign Secretary plan to strike a balance between economic growth and growing security concerns about China's dominance in critical national infrastructure and Chinese-made IoT modules?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. On coming into government, it was important that we conducted a China audit right across Whitehall to look at the range of relationships. Underpinning that are the three Cs: we will co-operate with China where we can, we will compete with China where we should, and we will challenge China where we must.

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): What conversations did the Foreign Secretary have with the Defence Secretary about the diplomatic implications of scrapping key military capabilities such as HMS Albion and Bulwark, and of the failure to set a timeline for spending 2.5% of GDP on defence spending?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I have huge respect for him, but that is a little bit rich, given the drop in defence spending that we saw under the last Government. The Prime Minister indicated just last week that we will set out our plans in due course. I am pleased that the Defence Secretary, on coming to power, launched a strategic defence review. Frankly, it should have been done under the last Government.

T8. [901474] **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that Iran's support for Russia's war in Ukraine is a direct threat to Europe's security, and can he outline what steps he is taking to respond?

Mr Lammy: We are deeply concerned by Iran's malign behaviour. The transfer of ballistic missiles to Ukraine was escalatory, which is why I sanctioned Iran Air and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines. I will

continue to speak to the Foreign Minister in Iran about these issues. Clearly, we are very concerned about any attempts by Iran to get nuclear capability.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): Scotland's international brand is used to boost our economy throughout the world, selling Scottish products and experiences and boosting our soft power, so can the Foreign Secretary tell us how his Department will be marking St Andrew's day on Saturday?

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): I am delighted to be able to take this question, as one of many Scots in the House. We are incredibly proud of brand Scotland, and our Scottish Secretary has been driving that forward and really pushing the case for Scotland's place in the world, working as part of the UK. We will most certainly be celebrating St Andrew's day—I certainly will.

T9. [901475] **Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford) (Ind): Action for Humanity research conducted in Gaza revealed that 53% of respondents already received no humanitarian aid during so-called evacuations, and there are fears that the Knesset's vote to sever ties with UNRWA is likely to reduce access to aid even further. The Minister has already referred to the representations that have been made, but what specific immediate actions will the Secretary of State undertake to reinforce the UN's multilateral framework and the Israeli Government's obligations under international law to ensure that sufficient aid reaches civilians in Gaza?

Mr Speaker: Order. I need to get other colleagues in. These are topical questions, and they are meant to be short and punchy.

Anneliese Dodds: We recognise the impact of sometimes repeated displacements on the population, with this happening up to nine times in some cases. We have used every opportunity to make clear the essential role of the UN, including UNRWA, in Gaza.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the ICC's decision does nothing to help secure the release of hostages, deliver more aid into Gaza or deliver a sustainable end to the war in the middle east?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Hamish Falconer): As I set out to the House yesterday afternoon, the ICC is the primary method of accountability for war crimes, and it should be supported across the whole House. Our support for the ICC does not limit the actions we take in relation to the other issues. We have already talked about hostages this morning and about the vital importance of the ceasefire, and we will continue to—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Alan Strickland.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his leadership in tackling and sanctioning those aiding and abetting the illegal invasion of Ukraine, but what more can we do to tackle the wider issues of corruption and kleptocracy that define Putin's cronies?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He served in Haringey before taking up his place in this House and we have been good friends over many years. He is right to raise this issue. We said that illicit finance would be a priority, and it will be. I hope to make further announcements on the back of the sanctions announcements that I made this week.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): With World Aids Day approaching, I am sure the whole House will agree on the impact that the Global Fund has had on tackling HIV and AIDS globally. With our replenishment coming next year, will Ministers commit to the UK continuing to make a significant contribution to the Global Fund?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question and for the leadership that he has shown on this issue, along with others across the House. The UK is determined to see successful replenishments for all the health-related funds, and we have announced with the WHO just this week that we are definitely going to do that.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Innovation plays a key role in tackling hunger. Can the Minister expand on what efforts we are taking to tackle hunger and how we are supporting innovators such as Alora, based at Norwich Research Park, which is using revolutionary technology to create the world's first ocean agriculture system?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this. We have incredible facilities in Norwich working on agricultural innovation, and they are important not only for global food production but for UK farmers. The research is used intensively by our local farmers as well as by others globally.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): It is ridiculous that Britain should even contemplate taking some of the 61 Sri Lankan asylum seekers on Diego Garcia as part of its agreement with Mauritius. There are serious concerns in Whitehall that some of those Sri Lankans have criminal records, and there are allegations that some of them may be involved in child abuse. I have raised this with the Home Office to no avail. Will Ministers in the Foreign Office make sure that all records are checked in Sri Lanka and in Diego Garcia to ensure that no such criminals or abusers are allowed into Britain?

Stephen Doughty: The Government inherited a situation in the British Indian Ocean Territory involving Tamil migrants from India and Sri Lanka who had arrived there. We are delivering a solution that protects migrants' welfare but avoids opening a dangerous new migration route. The hon. Gentleman's concerns regarding safeguarding and any other issues are absolutely at the heart of that and are being dealt with by Home Office and other ministerial colleagues.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will share my concern about the increasing number of women being given death sentences by the Iranian authorities. What urgent representations will he make to the Iranian Government to overturn those death sentences and ensure that women receive a fair trial?

Hamish Falconer: I can assure my hon. Friend that His Majesty's ambassador to Iran will continue to raise this appalling issue directly with Iranian officials in Tehran. Furthermore, the UK was instrumental in the adoption of the Iran human rights resolution at the UN Third Committee last week. The resolution calls on Iran to establish a moratorium on executions and to end reprisals against women human rights defenders.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The Government have indicated that they would arrest the democratically elected Prime Minister of Israel. Doing so would contradict an Act of Parliament and breach state and diplomatic immunity. Will the Foreign Secretary tell the House whether he believes compliance with the ICC's decision sets a precedent for future decisions of a similar nature? Is he not concerned that he is contradicting international norms?

Hamish Falconer: We considered this question at exhaustive length yesterday. I repeat that the shadow Attorney General has written on the question of which elements of international law are most properly followed in this case, and the Attorney General is set to respond, although we suspect that this case would go to the courts in the usual way.

Rachel Blake (Cities of London and Westminster) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent, the British citizen Jimmy Lai, is in failing health, and I thank the Foreign Secretary and his Department for all their work to uphold his rights under international law. Can the Foreign Secretary share his assessment of the scale of international support for Jimmy Lai's release?

Mr Lammy: "Massive" is probably the word I would use. His case is being raised in America and across the European Union, and we are raising it too. His trial has begun, and he is now well into his 70s, which is why I have made the case to the Chinese that he should be released. This is becoming cruel and unusual punishment, frankly.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The International Criminal Court has confirmed what we have all known for months, which is that the Israeli Government, under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu, have unleashed a concerted campaign of crimes against humanity on innocent Palestinian civilians. This is no longer a question of which side we are on, or of who is right or wrong. It is cold, hard legal fact, and we cannot allow it. Can the Secretary of State assure us that the Government are considering appropriate action against Netanyahu and Gallant to properly hold them to account?

Mr Speaker: Too long.

Hamish Falconer: I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) that the UK Government intend to stand by our international obligations in relation to the ICC, and in relation to many other things, too.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): After the issuing of the arrest warrants against Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, can the Foreign Secretary confirm when the Government will impose the scale of sanctions on Israel, not just individuals, that the Government rightly imposed on Russia after the ICC issued an arrest warrant against Putin? A war crime is a war crime, and an arrest warrant is an arrest warrant. All lives are equal, and we must ensure that there can be no accusations of double standards.

Hamish Falconer: Since the Government took office in July, I hope it has been clear how important questions of international law are to us, how soberly we treat these issues and how we ensure that in all matters, including in relation to the ICC cases that my hon. Friend describes, we follow due process, which is what we intend to do in relation to the ICC.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The civil war in Sudan is estimated to have killed around 150,000 people and displaced 14 million. UNICEF and the UN World Food Programme say that, unless efforts are stepped up, more than 700,000 children are projected to suffer acute malnutrition, so can the Minister tell us what steps the UK is taking as the UN penholder to end this malnutrition and support the Sudanese?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this. The Foreign Secretary recently co-led a resolution on the protection of civilians in Sudan. Unfortunately, despite 14 votes in favour, Russia vetoed that resolution. We will continue to push on these issues, and we have doubled our aid to Sudan because of the dreadful crisis there.

Stephen Gethins: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara) raised the very serious case of the detention of Alaa Abd el-Fattah, a British passport holder whose family are with us in the Gallery today. In his response, the Foreign Secretary said that my hon. Friend has a problem with having a British passport. There are Members of the House who have very different views about the constitutional future of this country, be they from Scotland, Ireland or Wales, so will you, Mr Speaker, reassure me and my colleagues that regardless of our views about the future, everybody who holds a British passport has the right to be stuck up for by their Member of Parliament?

Mr Speaker: Does the Foreign Secretary wish to respond?

Mr Lammy: I confirm that, of course, everybody with a British passport has the right to representation. I would hope that we are the kind of country that supports all sorts of people in trouble who are in our country, whatever their background.

COP29

12.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about COP29.

May I start by extending my sympathy to all those affected by Storm Bert? It has been a devastating event for people in different parts of our country, particularly in Wales, and my heart goes out to the families of those who have lost their lives and to all those whose lives have been disrupted.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I also want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Lord Prescott. He was a fighter for social justice and a champion of the environment. He rightfully has global recognition for his role in negotiating the Kyoto protocol, and he showed how politics can change lives for the better. I send my deepest condolences to Pauline and his family.

The UK attended COP29 to fight for our national interest—speeding up the clean energy transition in the interests of jobs, energy security and economic growth, and tackling the climate crisis for today's and future generations. In Baku, our message was clear: Britain is back in the business of global climate leadership.

We know that the impacts of the climate crisis know no borders. We have already seen the extreme impacts we can face here in Britain, and we know that if we do not act those impacts will get much worse. That is why, as the Prime Minister said at COP29, there is no national security without climate security. It is precisely because Britain represents only around 1% of annual global emissions that we have to work with others to ensure the remaining 99% of emissions are addressed to protect the British people.

The focus of this COP was on finance for developing countries, because the reality is that unless we persuade developing countries to go down the path of clean energy development, we cannot hope to reduce emissions and prevent climate disaster. Those countries face the triple challenges of needing to invest in the clean energy transition, coping with the costs of climate vulnerability and needing to develop to take their population out of poverty. At the same time, developed countries, including Britain, face extreme pressure on our public finances.

The COP talks are always complex, but those circumstances made this set of talks particularly so. I put on record my thanks to our outstanding team of civil servants who supported me at COP. I was repeatedly struck by the enormous respect they have from so many countries around the world. The UK's negotiating team was led by Alison Campbell, who is leaving to work with the UN Secretary-General. I want to put on record my special thanks to her in helping us to reach an agreement.

The agreement reached is to provide and mobilise at least \$300 billion of climate finance by 2035 for developing countries. Much of that will come from the multilateral development banks, such as the World Bank, which have stepped up to set a target to substantially increase the climate finance they provide. Importantly, for the first time, the agreement reflects a new global landscape, where traditional donors will be joined by big emitters such as China to help finance the transition. That is fair and right.

The UK will decide what our own contribution will be in the context of our spending review and fiscal situation, and that will come from within the UK aid budget. I can inform the House that, if delivered with the same impact as UK climate finance, the \$300 billion deal could lead to emissions reductions equivalent to more than 15 times the UK's annual emissions, as well as helping to protect up to 1 billion people in developing countries from the effects of floods, heatwaves and droughts. Crucially, the agreement will accelerate the global clean energy transition, which offers the prospect of export and economic opportunities here in Britain. Let nobody be in any doubt: this agreement is absolutely in our national interest.

In other respects, the talks were more disappointing. At COP28, the world made a historic agreement to transition away from fossil fuels. That agreement stands, but we did not reach agreement this year on how to take the commitment forward, not because the text put forward was too ambitious, but because it was not ambitious enough. In particular, many developing countries, including the small island states, felt that the text was inadequate given the scale of the climate emergency. Developed countries, including Britain, agreed with that view. That offers an important lesson. Under this Government, Britain is part of a global coalition for ambitious climate action that spans global north and global south—it is at the global centre ground of climate politics. We will seek to build on the agreement at COP30 next year, in Brazil.

At COP29, the UK also made important announcements on countering deforestation, scaling up private finance and nuclear co-operation as part of the clean energy transition. The Prime Minister also announced our nationally determined contribution to reducing emissions by at least 81% by 2035, compared with 1990 levels, following the advice that we received from the independent Climate Change Committee. Let me be clear: that target is right for Britain—for energy security, good jobs and growth.

On the same day as the announcement, ScottishPower and Siemens announced a £1 billion deal to invest in wind manufacturing in Hull. That will boost British manufacturing and support 1,300 good jobs in our industrial heartlands. It shows what the clean energy mission can do for Britain, and builds on the steps that the Government have already taken, which include: lifting the onshore wind ban; giving consent for nearly 2 GW of solar; setting up Great British Energy; delivering a record-breaking renewables auction; kick-starting our carbon capture and hydrogen industries; and driving towards cheaper, cleaner heating through our warm homes plan.

It is in our national interest to use the power of our example to work with others to speed up the clean energy transition globally, just as the Climate Change Act 2008, which was supported by Members from across this House, inspired others to follow our lead. That is why at the G20 in Brazil, the Prime Minister launched the global clean power alliance, along with a number of other countries, to drive forward the transition.

That is just the start of the work that we need to do in the run-up to COP30 to make next year's talks a success, because the truth is that despite progress over the last two weeks, we are halfway through the decisive decade for limiting warming to 1.5°C, and the world is way

off-track. Other countries, such as Brazil, have also announced ambitious NDCs, and in the months ahead, we will continue to push others to go further, faster, on raising ambition, scaling up finance, protecting nature and forests, and driving forward the clean energy transition.

The COP process is tortuous and progress is too slow. However, this Government believe that while multilateralism—in other words, co-operating with others—is hard, it is truly the only way to fight for Britain. Those who say that we should disengage from the negotiations and step off the stage would let down our country, deprive us of a voice and leave future generations paying the price. Despite all the difficulties, at COP29, one truth was overwhelmingly clear: the global transition away from fossil fuels and towards clean energy is happening, and it is unstoppable because clean energy is the route to energy security, unstoppable because it is the economic opportunity of our time, and unstoppable because people in Britain and around the world can see that the climate crisis is here, and that unless we act, things will only get worse.

In less than five months, this Government have shown that we will seize the opportunities of speeding up at home, and have demonstrated climate leadership abroad, in order to deliver energy independence, lower bills, good jobs, economic growth and the security of a stable climate. We are doing all we can to keep the British people safe, now and for generations to come. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Claire Coutinho.

12.48 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I echo his comments on Storm Bert and thank the emergency services for all that they have done to help those in need. I start by passing on my personal condolences to the right hon. Gentleman on the passing of John Prescott. I know that he wanted him to lead the Paris accords in 2015, having admired his work in Kyoto, and I believe that, at the time, he described John as good at “bashing heads together”. I hope that, as the Secretary of State’s opposite number, I can achieve some of that head-bashing that he so clearly valued in John.

In that vein, the Secretary of State has talked a lot about regaining global leadership, but I fear that he is stuck in 2009. He may not want to acknowledge this, but for the past 14 years, we have been a global leader. We are the only major economy to have halved carbon emissions since 1990. In that same time, America’s emissions have stayed the same and China’s have tripled. However, we have seen that countries are not persuaded just by Britain going further, faster; they are persuaded by prosperity, and by living standards. We account for 1% of global emissions, and I fear that if he continues down the path that he has set out, our country will face hardship, and there will be no point in being world-leading because nobody will want to follow our lead. He would make us a warning, not an example to others.

Let us start with what the Secretary of State announced at the conference of the parties. He has set out a new target of cutting our greenhouse gas emissions by 81% by 2035. However, what we did not hear in his statement is how much this will cost the British people. The independent Climate Change Committee says that that target will

require people to eat less meat and dairy, take fewer flights, and swap their boilers for heat pumps and their petrol cars for electric vehicles at a pace that will require taxes and mandation. Even the Chair of the Select Committee has acknowledged that people will be forced to change their lives. But the Secretary of State says not to worry, as he will deliver all the savings through energy policy, and those plans will lead to higher growth, a cut in bills, job creation and stronger national security, but when it comes to his plans, none of those things is true. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has already said that his climate plans will not lead to growth. The National Energy System Operator’s report shows that his rush for clean power in 2030 will add eye-watering costs to our energy system, and that despite those very expensive costs, it would still leave gas pricing the system around 50% of the time—or it would leave the equivalent of millions of homes in the dark waiting for the wind to blow. I do not think that that is anybody’s idea of energy or national security.

The Secretary of State does not have to take my word for it. The head of offshore wind development at RWE, one of the country’s largest wind developers, has warned that the Secretary of State’s rush to meet his 2030 target will lead to price spikes, with consumers losing out. The chief executive of Octopus has warned about the £6 billion in costs that consumers will have to pay, because the right hon. Gentleman wants to build renewables without reforming the grid. The former head of MI6 has warned the Secretary of State—[*Interruption.*] This is worth listening to. He said that from the point of view of national security, the Secretary of State is pursuing

“a completely crazy energy policy”.

The Secretary of State’s plans to make our energy expensive and unreliable will see jobs fleeing to more polluting countries, because it is cheap energy and innovation that matter in the race for jobs. We need only ask China, which dominates clean tech supply chains and is the world’s largest polluter. That is where billions of pounds of our taxpayers’ money will be going to pay for his rushed transition—from our country, with all the investment that it has made in clean power, to a country still 60% powered by coal. We are talking about low growth, high bills, jobs lost and even blackouts, for more carbon in the atmosphere. That is the opposite of what he has been promising.

In Baku, while the Secretary of State was signing us up to these targets without talking about what they will do to the lives of British people, he was also signing away billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money. He signed us up to a \$300 billion annual climate finance target. I am afraid that it is not credible to say that taxpayers will not have to pay more. They will have to pay more, and they deserve to know how much more. Will he tell us today what that new target will mean for British taxpayers? Considering the increase in the target, the public will rightly question why countries such as Russia and particularly China, now the world’s largest polluter and second largest by historical standards, will not be obliged to pay a penny—I think he tried to insist that they would, but it is very clear that they will not be obliged at all to pay in—while Britain, which has invested billions in cutting its emissions and accounts for only 1% of global emissions, will have to pay more. Will the Secretary of State also set out an assessment of the

[Claire Coutinho]

impact of increased reliance on coal-powered Chinese imports for his 2030 zero carbon plans, and of what that means for global emissions?

The Secretary of State is not being honest with the British public. He promised them £300 off their energy bills by 2030, but just weeks ago, he whipped his Labour MPs to vote down that pledge. He took away the winter fuel payment, despite promising that the elderly would be looked after under his energy policy, and he now says that he can achieve stronger climate targets in a way that will require zero cost from the public. This is not a recipe for climate leadership, but a recipe for higher bills and lost jobs, and it will be a disaster for the British public.

Mr Speaker: I just remind those on the Front Benches that the reply to a statement should last no longer than five minutes.

Ed Miliband: Oh dear, oh dear! Let me deal with the shadow Secretary of State's questions, such as they are. Let us start with our nationally determined contribution, announced at the conference of the parties. It is so interesting that she now opposes it, because the 2035 NDC announced by the Prime Minister is exactly the target that her Government legislated for in 2021, in the sixth carbon budget, which covers 2035. She is now opposing the very target that her Government put into law, and that she claimed, just a few months ago, that she was working towards as Secretary of State.

There is a pattern here, Mr Speaker. Every week, the right hon. Lady takes to Twitter to express her outrage about a policy, asking, "Who on earth could support this?" Every week, someone pops up in her replies and says politely, "You did, just a few months back." It is not the only time that she has done this. Last week, she came out against the clean heat market mechanism—another policy that she proposed. [Interruption.] She says not, but I have a statement from her from only eight months ago, in which she said that the clean heat market mechanism would be introduced in April 2025, which is exactly what this Government are doing. The truth is that she will leap on any passing bandwagon, even if it means trashing her record.

Let me give the shadow Secretary of State a little lesson about opposition. The job of the Opposition is to oppose the Government, not to oppose themselves. This is where she has ended up: out the window goes any commitment to climate action. She is ignoring the fact that it is a route to energy security, good jobs and lower bills, ignoring the fact that it is backed by business, and ignoring the fact that this country has an honourable tradition of bipartisan consensus on the issue. I am happy to say that the previous Government proposed some ambitious targets, and that COP26 was an important milestone for the world. This is not just irresponsible, and not just crass opportunism; it has helped take the Conservative party down to its worst election defeat in 200 years, so this approach will not work for her.

Let me tell the shadow Secretary of State what the clean energy superpower mission means for Britain. It means cleaning up our power system, so that we do not leave the country exposed to fossil fuels, as the previous Government did. It means new jobs in carbon capture

and storage as we decarbonise industry and re-industrialise. It means energy efficiency in homes, meaning lower bills, warmer homes and lower emissions. As for the NESO report that she talked about, I know that it is deeply disappointing to her, but we have an independent report that says that 2030 is achievable—she said that it was not. It also says that it will give us energy security—she says that it will not. It also says that it can lead to lower electricity, which she constantly denies.

The truth about the right hon. Lady is that she has nothing to say. The Conservative party is basically saying, "Stop the world—we want to get off." That will do nothing for the British people. She has a lot to learn. I am afraid to say that she needs to start reflecting on where her Government went wrong. They went wrong in many different ways, and she does not seem to be learning any lessons.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): May I gently say to the shadow Secretary of State that she really should not believe dodgy headlines in *The Daily Telegraph*? In fact, I am not sure whether headlines in *The Daily Telegraph* are ever not dodgy, based on what she was quoting. More importantly, though, let me congratulate the Prime Minister on his leadership at the conference of the parties, and the Secretary of State on leading the negotiations, and not least on delivering the £300 billion of climate finance for developing countries. He set out this country's achievement since the general election; to what extent will the combination of what this country showed at COP and what we have delivered at home since 4 July encourage countries around the world to play their part in addressing the climate crisis?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend asks an important question. Two truths came out of COP: first, the transition is unstoppable and, secondly, it is not going fast enough. There is such a difference from a decade ago—my hon. Friend, who was there with me, is nodding in agreement—because every country knows that the climate crisis is happening and is affecting them. The testimony I heard was like the testimony that we could provide about what people are seeing. Every country knows they have to act, and while they all face constraints in acting, they also know—this is the big change from a decade ago—that it is massively in their economic interests. There is a race on for the good jobs of the future, and the clean energy transition can provide them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): COP29 concluded with a deal that, while welcome, leaves much to be desired. I must stress that we need bolder, more decisive action if we are to face the greatest challenge of our time: the climate crisis. I know that the right hon. Gentleman's heart is in the right place and has been for many years. We first met in the run-up to COP15 in 2009, and I express my thanks to him for his staunch leadership in the intervening years. I express Lib Dem support for a brave programme of action going forward and our willingness to work with his Department to help the UK step up and seize this opportunity for climate leadership.

While we welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to ambitious emissions targets for 2035, commitments alone are not enough. Immediate action is needed to insulate homes, reduce energy costs and ensure that no one has to choose between heating and eating. The delay to Labour's warm homes plan until spring 2025 is unacceptable when millions of people, including 1.2 million pensioners, face a cold and unaffordable winter due to the cut in the winter fuel allowance.

In my South Cotswolds constituency and all across the UK, we have seen at first hand the devastating effects of climate change, and never more so than over the last few days, with floods and storms becoming more frequent and severe. Towns and villages in my constituency, such as Purton, Great Somerford and Cirencester, have been severely affected by flooding, and we need urgent action now to mitigate climate change and help our communities adapt to the likely impacts now and in the future.

I associate myself with the thanks already expressed to the brave men and women of our emergency services in the aftermath of Storm Bert. Climate leadership must prioritise solutions that protect communities and restore nature. Natural flood defences, such as wetlands—

Mr Speaker: You have used your two minutes.

Dr Savage: My apologies—I thought I had five minutes.

Mr Speaker: The Whips need to be giving you better instruction.

Dr Savage: May I finish with a question? Will the Secretary of State commit to including natural flood defences as a central part of the £5.2 billion flood defence spending to ensure that communities like those in the South Cotswolds are better protected from the worsening impacts of climate change while addressing biodiversity loss?

Ed Miliband: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and support for ambitious action, which is important.

Let me pick out a couple of the points she made. First, the point about the devastating effects of the climate crisis already being apparent is important. Part of the danger is that those effects will end up being the new normal, and we will just think of them as part of life. They are part of life in a sense and, as she said, we need the right flood defences in place and so on, but we also need to realise that those effects will get significantly worse if we do not act. Future generations will, frankly, hold us in infamy, saying, "You knew about the scale of the devastation and had seen a preview of what was to come, and you decided you couldn't act," so she is absolutely right.

Secondly, let me gently correct the hon. Lady on the warm homes plan. We are getting on with the warm homes plan; indeed, announcements were made last week about actions that will help over 300,000 families benefit from homes upgrades next year. There were announcements about heat pumps and a whole range of actions to help families do better and lower their energy bills.

I will make one more point, which is part of what the hon. Lady was saying: this is a climate crisis and a nature crisis. It is a climate and biodiversity crisis. It was

a bit disappointing that the nature part of the agenda at COP did not get the attention it deserved, and that will be important for COP30 in Brazil.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): No one can doubt the leadership that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State showed in Baku, and they deserve great credit for that. The Secretary of State is right that there is a danger of overselling the achievements of the COP. Developing nations have been critical about the financial agreement that was reached, and the commitments made in Paris on fossil fuels were not followed through, as he said. What are the main barriers right now to getting the action and pace of action that are needed? Does he have confidence that in Rio we will see the real breakthrough that the world is waiting for?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend asks absolutely the right question. The truth on the finance side is that this represents a significant scaling up at a time when developed and developing countries face extreme pressures on the public finances. There is a significant development whereby the flows to multilateral development banks from large emitters, such as China, will now count towards the overall finance goal. That is a big change and a big step forward.

On the transition away from fossil fuels, the barrier is that some countries are worried about what it means for them—that is totally understandable. Some countries think it will be problematic for their prosperity. The truth is that we will just have to make better efforts with the majority of countries that want to see action prevail at next year's COP, and that will involve hard yards. Finally, we must have a campaign for—this is something we will work on with Brazil—ambitious NDCs because it is crucial that that is the job of the next COP.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I commend to the Secretary of State "The UK Small Island Developing States Strategy" report, which was produced by the International Development Committee just before Parliament was dissolved for the general election. A key focus of that report is the need to support those island states not just at COP, but all the time by the UK being an advocate for their needs and requirements across the international community.

Ed Miliband: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and he speaks with customary eloquence on the issue. This is literally an existential issue for the small island states. Their testimony at COP was compelling and deeply distressing, and that is why the finance deal is important. It was not everything they wanted, but it is a step forward.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement today and the agreement reached at COP29 in Baku. He and I go back a long way on COP, so we know what it is like when it goes wrong. I particularly welcome the nationally determined contribution to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 81% by 2035. Does he agree that the fundamental reason we have leadership on the global stage now, as distinct from what we have had for the past 14 years, is

[*Ms Polly Billington*]

not just because of the target, but because we have a plan? This COP was supposed to be about implementation, and where we lead on implementation, others will follow.

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is right. She was with me at Copenhagen, and I definitely had Copenhagen post-traumatic stress disorder at the talks at various moments in the middle of the night. Her point about the target and actions is absolutely right, and there is global recognition that this Government have upped the pace in the multiple ways I described in my statement, and that is incredibly important. That is also important because business sees it happening and thinks that Britain is a country that is clear about its direction and that they will invest there.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I can only speak for North Norfolk, but a green energy future is exciting for our local economy, especially at Bacton. Just along the coast, villages like Happisburgh are suffering from being part of the fastest eroding coastline in Europe. The Secretary of State touched on coastal erosion in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), but can I push him specifically on how the outcomes of COP will provide reassurance to my residents who are worried about losing their homes to coastal erosion now?

Ed Miliband: As far as COP29 is concerned, we are speeding up global action. As I described in my statement, this finance deal could mean a reduction equivalent to 15 times the emissions of Britain. That is hard going, but it is the way to reduce the temperature rises that will take place. The world is in danger of busting through 1.5°C and going beyond that. That is why action is so urgent and why this finance deal really matters.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I strongly welcome the Secretary of State's signing of a new UK-US advanced nuclear technologies agreement at COP. Will he share more details of that agreement, and does he agree that it could form the basis of a much more ambitious agreement between the UK and the US on civil nuclear development?

Ed Miliband: That is an important agreement and I am glad that my hon. Friend has drawn attention to it. This is about the next generation of nuclear power stations. The truth is—and this applies across clean energy, in nuclear, renewables and so on—that we can learn so much from and work with each other in global and bilateral co-operation. We can work with US and UK companies. There can be huge benefits right across the country.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Last Thursday, the Prime Minister implied that the new wind energy project in Hull would result in lower energy bills for my constituents, but he refused to say by when. When can my constituents and others across the country expect to see the £300 reduction in their bills that the Labour party promised?

Ed Miliband: The National Energy System Operator report, which is the advice given to us by the independent body, shows that this will lead to lower electricity bills. That is so important, because we get two protections

from “Clean Power 2030”: one is lower bills, and the second is that we are protected against the devastating price spikes that affected the hon. Lady's constituents during the gas price crisis of 2022.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): When I consider this sort of issue, I tend to think of my grandchildren and what the world will be like for them in years to come. I listen to my right hon. Friend talk about our achievements over the past five months, and then I listen to the response from the Conservative party, which fills me with horror. Despite what my right hon. Friend says, there were tough negotiations at this COP, and he must be congratulated on the role that he played in achieving the agreements that we got there. How essential is it that we continue with that leadership, considering what could have happened if the Conservatives had stayed in power?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is right: although we have party political disagreements on some issues, this country has avoided a fraying and splitting of this consensus, as has happened in other countries. The consensus on climate action is so important precisely because of what he has set out: the fate of his grandchildren and all future generations, and the impact on them. I want to work with people across parties on this issue, because the more of a consensus we have, the better it is for the country.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): Low-income countries were extremely disappointed by the finance agreements at COP—\$300 billion does not come anywhere near the level of need. Critically, there was no clarity on how much of it would be grants, as opposed to loans, which would plunge global south countries further into debt. Does the Secretary of State share my concern about the potential dominance of loans and an overreliance on the private sector, and does he agree that considerable public finance could and should be raised through taxes on the most polluting companies?

Ed Miliband: I understand why the hon. Lady expresses that disappointment—indeed, a number of developing countries expressed that disappointment. However, I think that this is a considerable scaling-up of resources. That is to state the obvious, because \$100 billion was the previous commitment. It is the provision and mobilisation of resources. She is right about the balance between grants and loans, and about the funds that are required for adaptation, but the truth is that public finance on its own will never meet the need. That is why the agreement on carbon markets that was part of this COP is important, and why the mobilisation of private finance, and working on a road map to that mobilisation, which is also part of the agreement, is so important.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and acknowledge that the UK is lucky to have unique resources that put us at the forefront of the energy transition. Does he acknowledge that industrial heartlands such as ours in Doncaster were let down by the last Government, with promise after promise and announcement after announcement, but no delivery? Will he set out what

the Labour Government will do to back British industry and, more importantly, coalfields such as those in our constituencies?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is absolutely right about that. This is where the opportunities are huge. For South Yorkshire, there are opportunities around hydrogen, carbon capture and storage, and the jobs in insulating homes. We know that many of our industrial heartlands have been crying out for good jobs and good wages, and they have been crying out for them for a long time. This is the opportunity to make that happen.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): COP leaders agreed to triple climate finance to \$300 billion a year. The Secretary of State referred to the spending review in his statement, but the Prime Minister signed up to that international commitment. The Secretary of State must know how much the UK will have to pay. Will he tell the House?

Ed Miliband: That is not the way it works. We set a global total and then it is for individual countries to come forward with their contribution—that is the way it works.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. My constituency is at the mercy of climate change, as the floods showed at the weekend. It is deeply frustrating for many of my constituents to hear the Opposition fail to grasp the urgency. We are on the frontline of the impact of climate change, but we also want to be on the frontline of the response, so many of my constituents welcome the warm homes plan. What is he doing to ensure that we have the workforce to deliver that plan, particularly in constituencies such as mine that have houses that are quite hard to retrofit?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are working—through my Department and the Office for Clean Energy Jobs—with Skills England to ensure that we have that workforce plan. There are huge job opportunities here. We must ensure that we have the workforce plan, and that people have the assurance that work will be properly regulated and they can expect high standards. This is a massive national mission, and we will come forward with more proposals on it in the coming months.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): We learned three things from the statement. The first is that the climate finance will come from the existing UK aid budget. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that the increase in the UK aid budget will be greater than the amount that has gone on climate finance, so that we can be confident that we are not robbing Peter to pay Paul in the developed world? Do the important agreements on deforestation mean that the UK will stop spending almost £11 billion on subsidies to burn trees in England to generate electricity—is that one of the important elements that he talked about on deforestation? He claimed in his statement that GB Energy is set up. Can he tell us where we can go and see it? *[Laughter.]*

Ed Miliband: Thanks so much for the support. Let me deal with the hon. Gentleman's questions in turn. It has always been the case that climate finance is part of the aid budget—that is not some new announcement I have made. Obviously, that is a decision that we make, along with the Foreign Office and other colleagues across Government, about the right balance of resources and where the need is greatest.

As for GB Energy, he knows that it will be headquartered in Aberdeen. We are getting on with setting it up: we have a start-up chair in Juergen Maier, and it is ploughing ahead. We have been in office less than five months, but the legislation is going through, and that will happen.

The hon. Gentleman's second question was about Drax. The previous Government issued a consultation on that, and we will respond in the months ahead.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): The Secretary of State was absolutely right to say at the close of the climate talks that the only way to keep the British people safe from extreme weather and economic disruption is to ensure that the world acts together. That requires funding, but it is clear that the COP in Azerbaijan did not deliver that at the scale needed. The Make Polluters Pay coalition is calling for the big oil companies worldwide, which have made grotesque profits while driving the climate crisis, to fund the required investment at home and abroad. Is that not the fair way to secure the necessary finance?

Ed Miliband: We obviously have to look at all these issues. These global levies and taxes are always quite complex and difficult things to make happen. We have said that we will support the idea of the maritime levy, but we need to proceed cautiously on these issues, because frankly it is important that the finance is provided, and we will obviously engage in those discussions in the months ahead.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): As champions of the North sea, the previous Government underpinned 200,000 jobs right across the UK. What does the Secretary of State say to Offshore Energies UK, which says that the Government's energy tax has stripped out around £13 billion of investment in the North sea—money that will not be recovered by the anaemic and frankly invisible GB Energy?

Ed Miliband: We just disagree on the idea that we should not have taxed the unearned profits of the energy companies, which were paid for directly by the British people. If the hon. Gentleman wants to say that we should not have had a windfall tax on the oil and gas companies, he is way out of line with his constituents.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents are very proud that one of our own, Samia Dumbuya, was part of the Future Leaders Network working with the UK Youth Climate Coalition at Baku. I know that the Secretary of State will agree that young people need to be at the heart of what comes next following COP. They welcome the proposed NDCs, but they now need a direct and dedicated place in making them happen. Can he tell us what formal mechanism for the oversight and delivery of the reduction of emissions by 81% by 2035 he envisages for the young people of the UK?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend asks a really important question. I met with some of the youth campaigners and the youth coalition at COP, and I agreed with them. The UK has signed up to a youth clause in our NDC, which is about recognising young people as agents of change when it comes to climate and the need to engage with young people. I would love to talk to my hon. Friend and those young people about how we take those issues forward in the months ahead.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and agree that the UK must show global leadership on climate action. Peatlands are the largest natural terrestrial carbon store, yet damaged peatlands are responsible for almost 5% of global anthropogenic CO₂ emissions. The UK imports 60% of peat used in horticulture, offshoring carbon emissions abroad. Does the Secretary of State agree that, beyond COP29, we must continue to show global leadership and protect the environment by committing to a phased ban on peat in horticulture?

Ed Miliband: I will deal with the wider issues of peatlands, because money was allocated in the Budget for these issues through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. That is a very important issue, and the wider issue is also important. We also need to make progress at a global level. The other issues are actually a matter for DEFRA, but I will undertake to write to the hon. Lady on them.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I was proud of the constructive role that the UK played in the negotiations, representing our country and also some of the poorest people on the planet, who are at the absolute frontline of climate change, partly due to the emissions from this country. But COP is not without its critics, despite it being the only platform to progress our climate ambitions. How does the Secretary of State think that the process could be improved? In particular, what gentle advice would he give to anyone thinking about taking over the presidency of a major world economy early next year?

Ed Miliband: I will resist the second half of my hon. Friend's question, if you don't mind, Mr Speaker. On the first part of his question, the COP process does have its critics, so I will say a couple of things. First, 15 years ago, when I last attended the COP as Secretary of State in Copenhagen, no country was signed up to net zero. Now, 90% of the world's GDP is covered by net zero. That is not only because of the COP, but that process of international engagement is important, and it is a forcing mechanism to put world leaders on the spot. Secondly, the reason why it is hard is largely because we have 198 countries all trying to agree, which is difficult. If people can think of improvements to the system, that is great, but that engagement is really important.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Let me get this straight. The Secretary of State is welcoming a conference to deal with CO₂ where the host country tried to use it to sell oil and gas deals; where the leaders of those countries that are the major producers of CO₂ did not even bother turning up; where we sent 490 civil servants, flying them out to attend the conference; and where the main topic was how to extract money from countries

that were guilty of the sin of industrialisation. The Secretary of State has shot out his chest today and said, "We are now leaders in global climate." It is hard to be a leader when we have no followers, that is all I will say. How can the Secretary of State face the hard-pressed taxpayers of the United Kingdom, who are reeling under the impact of the latest Budget, and expect them to pay out billions to foreign countries—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ed Miliband: The right hon. Gentleman and I have been debating these issues for 15 years, and I hazard a guess that we will not end up agreeing. The truth about the climate crisis is that it is the biggest potential cost that future generations can face. There will be trillions of costs across the world and tens and hundreds of billions of costs in the UK if we do not act. All the evidence is that the costs of acting on climate change are much lower than the costs of not acting.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I was in Paris nine years ago when we started the process of negotiation on article 6 of the Paris agreement, which was concluded only with the gavel going down in Baku. It is an important process, ensuring a carbon market through the United Nations framework convention on climate change. How will the UK implement the new article 6 regulations? How will we support other countries in this important work, as we can utilise it for nature-based solutions such as reforestation and afforestation?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend makes a really important point—it may be a slight counter to the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson). Beneath the headlines, this is where the hard yards of work at COP happened. It has taken 10 years to do these article 6 negotiations and complete them, but this is about voluntary carbon markets. In answer to my hon. Friend's question, we are consulting on some of the high-integrity principles for that, but again, this will make a difference to developing countries and get funds flowing to them. That is another reason why these COPs are worthwhile.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The Secretary of State is in consensus-building mode. May I offer him the opportunity to address the 10,975 members of my Spelthorne constituency who will lose their winter fuel payments, or the 100,000 pensioners who will be plunged into poverty? Can he explain to them why they are wrong when they see the Government taking money from their pockets in order to be able to have enough money to send overseas?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman is wrong to say that. The truth is that the last Government left the public finances in an appalling state, which is why those decisions were made. As I have explained, we have agreed a global total when it comes to climate, but UK contributions are a matter for us and our spending reviews and depend on our fiscal situation.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Does the £1 billion Siemens deal in east Hull go to prove the Government's commitment to making the UK a clean energy superpower?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is right about that and has been a great champion on these issues. It shows the opportunities—there are countless opportunities across the world, including in relation to this finance deal, because this will create huge business opportunities. The truth is that Governments all across the world are alive to those opportunities, and I want Britain to win these jobs of the future.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Where is the leadership, and what example does it set, in flying 470 officials and delegates—more than any other western European country—halfway across the world to a climate change jamboree? Can the Secretary of State say what the cost has been in terms of carbon and cash?

Ed Miliband: There is a long tradition of civil servants playing a really important role at these COPs. In fact, the right hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that we sent 100 fewer civil servants to this COP than to the last one under the previous Government. I absolutely defend public servants doing a brilliant job and going to these COPs. Why? Because it is absolutely in the British national interest.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): To echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), will my right hon. Friend consider taking a young person—perhaps from a sixth form or a university—along to the next COP meeting as an adviser, to remind our delegation and, indeed, delegations around the world that it is young people's futures that are on the table?

Ed Miliband: There are indeed members of the UK Youth Climate Coalition who go to COPs. I do not want to interfere in UKYCC's processes for picking those people, but my hon. Friend makes an important point about the voice of young people. They represent young people, but they also represent future generations, and hearing how those future generations will regard the actions that we do or do not take is incredibly important.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Llinos Medi.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Diolch, Madam Deputy Speaker. Despite today's statement noting that it is in the UK's interest to speed up clean energy, we still need urgent clarity on clean energy projects. Will the Secretary of State finally confirm the Government's plan for nuclear at Wylfa in my constituency?

Ed Miliband: We do think that Wylfa has very important prospects. There is an important pipeline of nuclear projects that we are moving forward with, and we look forward to discussions about Wylfa in the coming months.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I commend the Secretary of State for his leadership and his statement, and join him in his bipartisanship. I am happy to recognise the contributions of Theresa May and Boris Johnson, but it says a lot that it takes Labour Members of Parliament to do that because Conservative Front Benchers are running so fast and so far away from those contributions. Does the Secretary of State agree that

clean energy is how we achieve energy security, and that energy security is how we achieve national security when our world is in turmoil and this country faces threats like never before?

Ed Miliband: Both the points that my hon. Friend makes are right. I am happy to acknowledge the role of Theresa May in putting net zero into law, as well as that of Alok Sharma and even Boris Johnson, who fought to champion some of these issues. It is a real shame, and it speaks volumes, that we can say those things and the Conservatives do not.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I agree with the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes), who talked about there being no national security without energy security. We discovered after Russia's invasion of Ukraine how dependent the UK was on imported gas. When talking to other countries, did the Government make the case for investment in clean energy, and how it can reduce dependency on malign petrostates such as Russia?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the truth, which is that, unfortunately, fossil fuels do not give us energy security. Whether those fossil fuels came from the North sea or were imported, prices shot through the roof; our constituents paid the price, and the Government paid out £94 billion in support. That is why our clean energy superpower mission is so important, to give us the energy security that the Conservatives completely failed to give us.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I commend the Energy Secretary on his work, both in the UK and his global leadership at COP29. Many developing countries continue to face the intensifying effects of the climate crisis. For their sake and for ours, we cannot afford inaction and delay. Can the Secretary of State clarify what specific work will be undertaken to improve global ambitions so that we can transition away from fossil fuels and keep alive the commitment to keep the world's temperature rise below 1.5°C?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend asks absolutely the right question. That is the work that we will be undertaking with Brazil and other like-minded countries in the year ahead. Next year marks a very important moment: we have to set our nationally determined contributions for 2035, five years on from the last time the world did so. This is such an important moment, because it is how we need to get back on track for keeping temperature rises down. We will be straining every sinew to work with others to make that happen.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to hear the Secretary of State committing to a strategy and a plan that looks forward, even though we may have some questions about it. My fear has always been about the funding that has been granted, which is incredibly substantial. How will the Secretary of State ensure that that huge pot of funding is used to achieve the necessary aims, not siphoned off or lost in the process? I say this bearing in mind that pushing a pen around and making a way through red tape can be a very costly endeavour. That money needs to go to the

[Jim Shannon]

projects that make a difference. How can that be guaranteed before we allocate any more of our hard-pressed taxpayers' money?

Ed Miliband: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. As much as developing countries wanted the biggest possible sum to support them, they were as worried about the quality of finance and their access to funds as they were about the quantum. Time and again, I heard from developing countries that they wait years to access the available funds, so ensuring that they are spent on the right things and are accessible will be crucial work for the months and years ahead.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and the leadership that this Government showed at COP29, recognising that with the global transition under way, the economic benefits will accrue to those who lead and shape it, rather than shy away from it and remain all too passive in the face of the economic forces that it heralds. Can the Secretary of State set out how we will ensure that we capture those benefits domestically and show the necessary leadership to drive investment, growth and opportunity to every part of the UK, so that we have a coherent economic strategy that touches every part of our nation?

Ed Miliband: Both parts of what my hon. Friend says are right. Since we contribute only 1% of global emissions, we must work with others to ensure that we tackle this problem. The biggest thing I find in this job is that clarity of purpose and direction makes a huge difference to private investors. Uncertainty is the enemy of investment, while the certainty and direction that this Government are providing is the friend of companies investing in the UK.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Constituencies such as mine and regions such as the north-east once powered the British economy. Does the Secretary of State agree that the leadership we are now showing must secure investment for those regions that have far too often been left behind, and that that investment must include new nuclear for towns such as Hartlepool?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is the route to reindustrialisation, and nuclear is a central part of this Government's clean energy mission.

As I always say, electricity use will at least double by 2050, so we need all the technologies at our disposal.

Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and thank him for showing such leadership on the world stage alongside the Prime Minister. As he mentioned in his statement, Britain must show leadership to get the 99% of emissions contributed by the rest of the world down, with nearly 1 billion people at risk of drought, flooding and heatwaves. Given the climate sceptics who now face him on the Opposition Front Bench, can my right hon. Friend restate for this House why it is in Britain's interests to help those people?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. My constituents in Doncaster have faced two supposedly one-in-100-year flooding events over the past 10 years or so, and we know that those events will become much more extreme if we do not act, but the truth is that we cannot act on our own; we must act with others. That is the fundamental case for multilateral engagement and working with others on these climate issues, which the Conservative party used to believe, but no more it seems.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for his clear global leadership on this issue over many years. A constituent, Michael Jones—a leader in climate change education—attended Baku as part of the COP delegation with a delegation of students from across the UK as part of the climate change challenge, leading on efforts to educate policymakers on the impacts of climate change on the next generation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the next generation deserve better and a Government who—unlike the Opposition, who flip-flop and show no consistency on the issue—have a firm commitment to deliver a reduction in emissions with the international community?

Ed Miliband: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. [Interruption.] Conservative Members are chuckling away but the truth is that this is a very serious and important point. The British people want us to act. They want us to act across parties on this issue. They know it is a massive threat to our country because they see it in their daily lives and they see it on the news, and they also know it is the biggest opportunity for our country. We believe it. The Conservatives used to believe it; I am afraid they are way out of step with the British people.

“Get Britain Working” White Paper

1.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement on our “Get Britain Working” White Paper, bringing forward the biggest reforms to employment support in a generation, turning a Department for welfare into a Department for work, and taking the first steps towards delivering our bold ambition of an 80% employment rate in a decade of national renewal.

Nothing short of fundamental reform is needed to turn the page on the last 14 years, the legacy of which has left the UK as the only G7 country whose employment rate has not returned to pre-pandemic levels and with a near-record 2.8 million people out of work due to long-term sickness, and almost 1 million young people not in education, employment or training and millions more stuck in low-paid insecure work. All those problems are far worse in the midlands and the north, parts of the country that were deindustrialised in the ’80s and ’90s—the very same places that have lower life expectancy and chronic poor health that the Conservative party repeatedly promised to level up but repeatedly failed to deliver on.

The result is an economic but, above all, social crisis, paid for in the life chances and living standards of people across this country, and by a benefits bill for sickness and disability that is set to rise by £26 billion by the end of this Parliament. We have ended up here because of the failure of Conservative Members to create good jobs in every part of the country, to deliver on the NHS, and to properly reform welfare. Under our Government, that will change, with new opportunities matched by the responsibility to take them up: under this Labour Government, if you can work, you must work.

Our White Paper brings in three major reforms. First, we will create a new jobs and careers service that overhauls jobcentres: from a one-size-fits-all service that overwhelmingly focuses on administering benefits, to a genuine public employment service that provides personalised support for all. We will bring jobcentres together with the National Careers Service in England, beginning with a pathfinder early next year, backed with £55 million of initial funding. We will work closely with mayors and local leaders to ensure that our new jobs and careers service is rooted in local communities and properly joined up with local help and support. We will also work closely with employers to develop the service, because only one in six businesses has ever used a jobcentre to recruit, and that must change.

For too many people, walking into a jobcentre feels like going back in time to the ’80s or ’90s, so we will trial a radically improved digital offer using the latest technologies and AI to provide up-to-date information on jobs, skills and other support, and to free up work coach time. We will also test video and phone support—because in the 2020s, rather than go into the jobcentre only every week or fortnight, people can have a jobcentre in their pocket. Our frontline staff are our greatest asset, so we will develop the work coach and careers adviser professions, including by launching a new coaching academy.

The second major reform is our new youth guarantee, so that every young person is earning or learning. This comes alongside our commitment to provide mental

health support in every school, our work experience and careers advice offer, and our plans to reform the last Government’s failed apprenticeship levy to give more young people the opportunities they deserve. Our new youth guarantee will go further, bringing together all the support for 18 to 21-year-olds under the leadership of mayors and local areas so all young people have access to education, training and employment opportunities and no young person misses out. Today I can announce that we will establish eight trailblazer areas for our youth guarantee: the Liverpool city region, the west midlands, Tees valley, east midlands, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, west of England, and two areas within Greater London, backed by £45 million of additional funding.

I can also announce a new national partnership to provide exciting opportunities for young people in sports, arts and culture, starting with some of Britain’s most iconic cultural and sporting organisations, including the Premier League, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and Channel 4, building on the brilliant work they already do to inspire and engage the younger generation and get them on the pathway to success.

This is our commitment to young people: “We value you, you are important, we will invest in you and give you the chances you deserve; but in return for these new opportunities, you have a responsibility to take them up, because being unemployed or lacking basic qualifications when you are young can harm your job prospects and wages for the rest of your life. And that is not good enough for young people or for our country.”

The third reform in our White Paper is our new plan to drive down economic inactivity caused by poor health. The Health Secretary is already taking action to get people back to health and back to work, with extra support to drive down waiting lists in the 20 NHS trusts with the highest levels of economic inactivity. We are joining up employment and health support, expanding individual placement support to reach an additional 140,000 people with mental health problems and delivering new WorkWell services, which include GPs referring patients to employment advisers and other work-related support such as the brilliant service in the Junction Medical Practice in North London we visited recently.

However, we will go much further and faster to tackle this issue. To meet the scale of the challenge, we will devolve new funding, new powers and new responsibilities to tackle economic inactivity to mayors and local areas, because local leaders know their communities best. We will support all areas in England to produce local “Get Britain Working” plans, joining up work, health and skills support.

Today I am announcing eight trailblazer areas backed by £125 million of additional funding in south Yorkshire, west Yorkshire, the north-east, Greater Manchester, Wales, York and north Yorkshire, and two Greater London areas. In three of these areas—south and west Yorkshire, and the north-east—this will include dedicated input and £45 million of funding for local NHS integrated care systems. We are also funding a new supported employment programme called Connect to Work, backed by £115 million of initial funding for next year. This will be included in the integrated settlements of combined authorities, starting with Greater Manchester and the west midlands.

[Liz Kendall]

Employers have such an important role to play in helping get people into work, and crucially to stay in work, so today I can announce a new independent “Keep Britain Working” review, looking at the role of UK employers and Government in tackling health-related inactivity and creating healthy workplaces. This will be led by the former chair of John Lewis, Sir Charlie Mayfield, and will report in the autumn.

Finally, we will bring forward a Green Paper on our proposals for reforming the health and disability benefits system, so that disabled people and those with health conditions have the same rights as everybody else, including the right to work; so that we treat disabled people with dignity and respect; and so that we shift the focus to prevention and respond to the complex and fluctuating nature of today’s health conditions. We will work closely with disabled people and their organisations as we develop our proposals, which we will publish in the spring.

This White Paper starts to turn the corner on the past 14 years, putting forward the real reforms we need to get more people into work and on at work, to give young people the very best start in life and to ensure our employment and social security system understands the fundamental issue that a healthy nation and a healthy economy are two sides of the same coin. This is how we get Britain working again. It is how we get Britain growing again, and I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.50 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. The Conservatives are the party of work and aspiration—[*Interruption.*] In the decade after we took over from Labour, we drove down unemployment—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order.

Helen Whately: In the decade after we took over from Labour, we drove down unemployment and economic inactivity year after year, including youth unemployment, which went down by 400,000 after the mess we inherited from the last Labour Government. During the pandemic, we took unprecedented action to protect jobs and livelihoods, but since the pandemic we have faced a new and difficult challenge in this country: rising economic inactivity, particularly among young people. In government, we were tackling that. I know that, because as a Health Minister I was working on it. I am delighted that the right hon. Lady and the Health Secretary visited one of our WorkWell pilots just the other day. I was working on our fit note reforms, our youth offer, which helped a million young people, and our universal support scheme, which I now hear the Secretary of State has quietly rebranded as her own Connect to Work scheme.

Far from being cross that the Government are pinching our ideas, I welcome the right hon. Lady taking our work forward. She is making the right noises about how important it is to fix this area. Economic inactivity is a big problem for our economy and for each and every

individual who risks being written off to a life on benefits. Knowing that, I am disappointed by the substance of what she is announcing today, because far from matching her rhetoric, it appears to be little more than a pot of money for local councils, some disparaging language about the work of jobcentres and a consultation that will be launched in the spring. Given that the Government have had 14 years to prepare for this moment, is that it?

Where are the reforms to benefits that will make material savings to the taxpayer, such as the £12 billion we committed to save in our manifesto? Where are the reforms to fit notes, which we had handed over, ready to go? Where is the Secretary of State’s plan for reforming the work capability assessments? She has banked the £3 billion of savings from our plan, but has failed to set out her own. Her big announcement is making benefits for young people conditional. Did she forget that they already are?

The fact is that the Secretary of State has dodged the tough decisions. Every day that she kicks the can down the road costs the taxpayer millions of pounds. At this rate, spending on sickness benefits will rise to £100 billion by the end of this Parliament. They are taking that money from farmers, from pensioners and from businesses. To get people off benefits, we need jobs for them to go into. Those are the very jobs that businesses are saying, since the Budget, they will no longer be hiring for. While the right hon. Lady tries to get people into work, her Chancellor is busy destroying jobs—50,000 jobs lost from her first Budget alone.

If the Secretary of State wants to get more 18-year-olds into work, she should have a word with her Chancellor, who has made it so that from April it will cost £5,000 more for a business to employ them. She should have a word with her Business Secretary, whose Employment Rights Bill will, according to the Government’s own impact assessment, make it less likely for employers to take on young people. The Government cannot solve this problem on their own. Businesses are the engine of our economy that create jobs for people to do. It is telling that I cannot see a single business representative on the new Labour Market Advisory Board.

I did hear the right hon. Lady talk about some new partnerships, but this announcement is such a song and dance about so little that I feel sure she will qualify for one of her own Royal Shakespeare Company apprenticeships. She has kicked the can so far down the road that her new partner, the Premier League, is sure to be on the phone by the end of the day.

May I for a moment cut through the word soup of the announcement? It is time for the right hon. Lady to tell the House some facts. How many people will it help into work, and by when? What is the total she is saving the taxpayer? When will she reach her 80% employment target? What return on investment is she expecting from these plans? How will she measure her success or failure? This is so far from the bold grasping of the nettle that she is making it out to be and that this country needs for our economy, for taxpayers and for the millions of people missing out on the purpose and freedom that work brings. It is simply not good enough.

Liz Kendall: May I say gently to the hon. Lady, who I personally like and have a great deal of time for, that the only people who dodge difficult decisions on welfare

are the Conservatives? The facts speak for themselves. By the end of this Parliament, the Office for Budget Responsibility says that 420,000 more people will be on health-related universal credit benefits, rising from a third now to a half at the end of the Parliament. That is her Government's legacy. One in eight of all our young people are not in education, employment or training. We have seen a doubling in the number of young people out of work due to long-term sickness and a doubling of young people out of work because of mental health problems. After 14 years in government, who does she think is responsible for that? I am afraid that the truth is staring her in the face: the Conservatives are now the party of welfare, and Labour is the party of work.

The hon. Lady talks about British businesses. I know only too well the pressures that many businesses face. We have spoken to the CBI, the Federation of Small Businesses and the British Chambers of Commerce, and they are keen to work with us on our proposals. They know that their members have hundreds of thousands of vacancies that they need to fill, one in three of which is because of skills gaps. They know that 300,000 people every single year fall out of work due to a health condition. They need support to try to tackle that problem. I believe that the Department for Work and Pensions and jobcentres should serve businesses' needs and aspirations, not be the place of last resort. That is precisely what our reforms will deliver.

Finally, the biggest challenge we face today is the growing number of people out of work or at risk of falling out of work due to health problems or a disability. Our entire employment and benefits system is simply not geared up to deal with that. We will take examples of good practice from wherever we find them, but we have got to go much further. We need big reforms, not easy slogans that say people just felt a bit too bluesy to work, which do nothing to help people get to grips with the real issues in their lives. We are facing up to our responsibilities and the difficult decisions necessary to get Britain working again. It is time the hon. Lady and her party did the same.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and I look forward to reading the White Paper later. The cross-departmental approach she is taking with colleagues is essential and is a breath of fresh air, particularly in relation to tackling the root causes of economic inactivity, which she has explained predominantly relate to ill health.

In addition to the need to tackle regional inequalities in employment, my right hon. Friend will be aware that there is a 30% disability employment gap, with 2.25 million disabled people wanting and able to work. How will she tackle that real injustice? We know that disabled people are more likely to be living in poverty than other groups. What are her specific plans in that regard?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. The Minister for Social Security and Disability and I are working hard to tear down the barriers to disabled people being able to get work and get on in work. We are taking action across Government, including

reporting on the disability employment gap. We need to tackle the long waits for Access to Work and the adaptations and other support that people need.

We also need brilliant supported employment programmes for people with autism and learning difficulties, such as those that I and my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary recently visited in our own NHS trusts. They really provide a pathway to work, with the right help and support. There is much more that we need to do, and I look forward to discussing these issues with my hon. Friend and other members of the Committee.

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

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Under the Conservatives the UK's was the only economy to see employment rates fall over the last five years, leaving a legacy of wrecked apprenticeships, mental health services not fit for purpose and millions on waiting lists unable to work, as well as those with caring responsibilities staying at home to provide care for their loved ones because of the failure in our social care system. The Liberal Democrats welcome steps to improve access to skills, training and education. I praise the work of Fedcap and Maximus UK, which are doing just that in Chichester in conjunction with the jobcentres, working with those who have had long periods of economic inactivity or have additional challenges in finding work. But the insecurity and short-term nature of Government funding for such projects means that both organisations had to pause their referrals this year while they waited for the Government to confirm their continued funding. I am sure that the Secretary of State agrees that to get people back into work, the organisations already trying to do that need more security from the Government.

When it comes to tackling the mental health crisis, it is not enough to reverse the Conservatives' lack of action. The Government must be proactive in improving mental health services. I invite the Secretary of State to take the proactive ideas that the Liberal Democrats laid out in our general election manifesto such as catching more mental health conditions early on by offering mental health MOTs and the introduction of mental health hubs in every community to deliver ease of access to walk-in services and support.

It is abundantly clear that ensuring people get the NHS treatment they need is critical to getting people back to work. The NHS cannot tackle its long waiting lists unless the Government get serious about fixing the crisis in social care. We have heard a lot of words from the Government on social care but seen little action, with the increase in the social care budget totally eroded by the national insurance contribution rise. Does the Secretary of State agree that a healthy society is a productive society and that fixing the health and social care crisis will get our country back to work?

Liz Kendall: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. Yes, I agree that we have got to tackle the root causes of the problem and have an NHS and social care system that is fit for purpose. We have put forward our commitments on mental health support in every school and every community. We know that many mental health problems start before someone turns 18, so we have to try to prevent those problems in the first place, but there is much more that we need to do.

[Liz Kendall]

We are starting to see fantastic NHS services that provide employment advice as part of care. The evidence shows that if a person is in good work, a sense of purpose and structure is good for their mental health. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary is pushing for that to be available in all parts of the country.

I am under no illusions about the scale of the challenge. Only 3% of people who are economically inactive get back to work in any given year, so we have to prevent the problems from happening in the first place as well as doing more to help those people into work.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Under the last Government, the DWP faced legal action for its unlawful treatment of disabled people. How will this White Paper, with its positive vision, rebuild trust and better support disabled people going forward?

Liz Kendall: The Government believe that disabled people have the same rights as everybody else, including the right to work. Our mission is to break down the barriers. Many disabled people would want to work if they could get the right help and support and a job that fits their needs and concerns, with greater flexibility. This is a really important challenge. I do not blame disabled people for often being frightened and worried when they hear about these discussions after what happened over the past 14 years, but we will work with disabled people and the organisations that represent them to get the world of work and the employment support system right and get a better-functioning system of disability benefits. This is a really big challenge for our country, but with these proposals we are taking an important step forward.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's ambition in many of the areas she has set out, and particularly the “Geep Britain Working” initiative. As a Parliament, we must come to terms with the obesity and mental health crises, so I welcome what she is doing with the Secretary of State for Health.

May I bring to the Secretary of State's attention the work of South Wilts Mencap? I recently met Robin Clifford, and over 14 years I have seen the work that that group of trustees does with the adult learning disabled, a particular and special group of individuals in my constituency. I would welcome the opportunity to meet the Minister for Social Security and Disability to look at programmes that could be started or pilots that could be undertaken to get the learning disabled into meaningful activity where they can make some contribution through paid work.

Liz Kendall: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that important contribution. I and the Minister for Social Security and Disability would be keen to hear more about that work. I recently visited a supported employment programme—a year-long supported internship—run by my local health service for young people with autism and severe learning difficulties. It started by talking to the parents about what the young people could do, and not just what they could not do. The young people were got on the bus to get them to work. They tried three different jobs around the hospital to find the one that best matched their needs, and after that year every single young person was given a paid job. That is so

successful that we are expanding it to the local university and to one of Leicester's biggest hotel chains. These changes are possible, and I am keen to work with the right hon. Gentleman in his area to ensure that we give these opportunities.

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I believe that these reforms will be transformative, and it is not before time. In my constituency, we have long recognised the gaps that exist in the system. Our local authorities have put in place the brilliant “Working Denbighshire” programme and Conwy employment hub, which really drills down into what local people need and takes them on a pathway into work. Does the Secretary of State agree that devolving power and—crucially—funding in the way she set out is key to achieving the best results we can for local people in their area?

Liz Kendall: This is a major change in our approach. Local areas know best their needs and the different organisations that can help achieve goals. I know that economic inactivity in my city is predominantly driven by people with caring responsibilities; in other parts of the country, it is more about physical health or mental health problems. We need different things in different parts of the country—that is the best way to get the best results. It is a big change for the Department for Work and Pensions to be a much more localised service and to be much more joined up with other parts of government, both nationally and locally, but that is how we will deliver change.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): Businesses in my constituency are really worried and putting off investing and creating jobs because of the Labour party's Budget, and in particular the increase in regulations and the national insurance increase. How does the Secretary of State plan to get everyone who should be in work back to work if no jobs exist out there?

Liz Kendall: I understand the pressures that many businesses are under. The Budget tried to deal with a very difficult issue: if we are spending more than we are earning, our public finances are not working. Anyone who runs a business knows that they have to get the finances right, but many organisations recognise that they need to recruit more people with the skills that meet their particular concerns. They are worried about the increasing number of health conditions and people leaving work because of them. I am determined to work with and serve local businesses. I would be very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to talk about the specific needs of businesses in his constituency.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I warmly welcome the White Paper. I think it is a huge step forward. Mental health challenges have been the biggest single driver of rising inactivity among the young, and we know that mental health can be hugely helped by work. One study shows that just eight hours of work a week will reduce the risk of depression and anxiety by up to 30%. Given that, what will the Secretary of State do to help support those at risk from mental health issues to get back to work?

Liz Kendall: I have talked about what we aim to do to prevent mental health problems from happening in the first place, with more mental health support in schools

and in the community. I see this as a fundamental overhaul of the way the DWP and the NHS work together, so that support to get people with mental health problems into the right jobs becomes part of what the NHS does, by putting employment advisers into the NHS. The individual placement and support service, which began under the last Government through the NHS, has shown quite phenomenal results—40% of people are in work after five years. Their use of the health service—the number of relapses and days they spend in hospital—are also reduced. That is better for work and for mental health. This requires a big change in the way we work, but my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary and I are determined to make that happen.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Many disabled or ill people were terrified by the Tories' proposals to cut £3 billion from sickness benefit. Given that Labour is continuing that cut, will the Secretary of State promise to sign up to the principle of "nothing about us without us" and ensure that disabled people, those with ill health and those with lived experience of these systems are round the table, making the decisions on how this moves forward?

Liz Kendall: I have always been a big champion, including when I worked in social care, of working in partnership with people to get the decisions right first time. That is really important, which is why the Minister for Social Security and Disability and I are absolutely clear that we will work with disabled people in the relevant organisations to get this system right. I want to be really clear that the system is not working. People have to wait weeks on end to get an assessment, which often is overturned at tribunal. We do not do enough to prevent people from falling out of the workplace. Ninety per cent. of people who get back into work after a bout of sickness do so within the first year, but we do not use that opportunity to provide the help and support that they need. We need change. I understand how worried people are when they hear about change, but I think they would also say that the change needs to happen, and we are determined to put that in place.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I warmly welcome the statement by my right hon. Friend, because giving people the opportunity to get on in life and have dignity in good work is at the heart of what drove me to this place. Does the Secretary of State agree that helping people into work in Paisley and Renfrewshire South is about getting the economy growing again, as well as putting more money into people's pockets? Will she say a little more about her discussions with the Scottish Government to ensure that they will play their full part in making sure that this works?

Liz Kendall: I am absolutely determined to get more people into better-paid jobs in every part of the country. That is the key to improving people's living standards and to getting the economy growing again. Our new jobs and careers service will look different in Scotland because the Scottish Government are responsible for running the careers service there, but we are already in discussions about how to make sure that our plans meet the specific needs of people in Scotland, including in

my hon. Friend's constituency. I look forward to receiving her ideas and suggestions, which I know she will always provide.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I want the Secretary of State to succeed, and I want her to be part of the first Labour majority Government ever to leave office with employment higher than when they started. I had hoped to hear a little more about reform, rather than just about a review, but this is a welcome step in the right direction. Businesses in Basildon and Billericay have been telling me that although they welcome some of the schemes—I am sure that some of them will do good things—they are absolutely terrified by both the taxes coming through national insurance and the hit on them through business rates. The Office for Budget Responsibility says that at least 50,000 jobs a year will go because of those changes, so where will the people who she is hoping to get off benefits and into work find that employment?

Liz Kendall: As I have said to other hon. Members, I am keen to talk to businesses right across the country, including in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, about the challenges that they face. We took a decision when we got into office that we could not continue with the fantasy economics. We cannot spend more than we earn. We have to invest in the long-term physical infrastructure of the country, but also in our people, who are our best assets. We must get the NHS back on its feet. I know the issues that businesses face, but they are also thinking about the longer term—the vacancies, and how on earth they get the skills that their business needs. I would be very happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman about that, if he likes.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome the statement from my right hon. Friend, and particularly what she said about the coaches and assistance for young people getting into work. What she describes seems to fit neatly with what the Government propose for the green economy, and its highly skilled, well-paid jobs. How will training for those jobs play a part in getting people from unemployment into work?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. The "Get Britain Working" White Paper is part of a much wider series of reforms that the Government are making to create more good jobs in every part of the country, including in green energy, through our modern industrial strategy, and through our plans, in the new deal for working people, to make work pay. Yesterday, I was at a college in Peterborough that is looking at how to upskill young people so that they can get the clean, green energy jobs of the future. That needs to happen in every part of the country, because we want the new jobs that we are creating to be available to those who need them most. We have not really managed to fit that together before—to get the DWP and our "Get Britain Working" plans underpinning our local growth plans. That is a big change that we have to deliver, if we are to make sure that everybody in this country benefits from the jobs we are creating.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome much of what the Secretary of State has said, and I am delighted that she has assured us that there will be discussions with the Scottish Government about plans for Scotland. Throughout the past two or three years,

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businesses in my constituency have told me that they are concerned that they cannot get people to work for them, so this strategy will be welcome. However, does the Secretary of State appreciate that many of us see a contradiction between this policy and the national insurance changes? A major employer in my constituency tells me that the changes will cost it £250,000 extra a year, and it will not take on seasonal workers because it cannot afford to. How does that damaging policy for business go alongside trying to encourage more people back to work?

Liz Kendall: Of course businesses face these pressures, but I think many of them understand that the Government have to look at the fundamentals. We faced a problem with the public finances when we got into government. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor took the decision that the only way we could sort out the country for the long term was to get the public finances back on a more sustainable footing. The businesses that I have met, including Tesco in my constituency, raised concerns with me, but they also said that they really want to get more young people who have mental health problems into work. Tesco has a brilliant partnership with the King's Trust to get those young people into work and help them stay there, because it knows that the key to those young people's future is to get those skills, so that they can grow business and make the changes that this country needs.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. My constituents will very much welcome the additional funding for young people in the Tees Valley, and the modernisation of jobcentres, which will benefit our wonderful jobcentre staff. Can the Secretary of State say how the changes will dovetail with the Employment Rights Bill? How will we ensure that young people are offered quality employment and training opportunities, and not pressured into accepting inadequate and insecure zero-hours jobs? Can she also say how the Government and Members can monitor and evaluate the combined authorities' delivery of the youth trailblazer programme?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend will know of our plans to make work pay, bring in day one employment rights, end exploitative zero-hours contracts and improve flexibility at work. We need to do all those things to make sure that there are good-quality job options out there for young people. There will be new leadership roles for mayors in combined authorities, but also clear accountability for delivering the outcome that we want, which is that every young person has an opportunity to earn or learn. We will make sure that happens.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): To ensure that "if you can work, you must work", will the Secretary of State familiarise herself with the works of Jeremy Bentham?

Liz Kendall: If I have time.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): We have heard much about the failures of the Conservative party, but after 17 years of SNP failures, young people

in Central Ayrshire are looking to this Government for the opportunity for a good job. What more will my right hon. Friend do, through today's announcement, to help young people in Central Ayrshire and across Scotland?

Liz Kendall: It is hugely important that we deliver these new opportunities in every part of the country, including to people of all ages in Scotland. We will work with the Scottish Government on that, but also, really importantly, with local councils, who have a huge role to play. Our jobcentres really need to change. They need to meet the needs of employers and future employees in every part of the country. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend, to get his ideas on what will work best. Perhaps we could do a joint visit to his jobcentre.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is all very well us talking about the Department for Work, but a challenge is often that we fail those in employment who are interacting with the benefit system. I have a number of constituents in North East Fife who are paid on a four-weekly basis but who also claim universal credit, which means that, one month a year, they lose their universal credit. Simply telling them to try to put money aside to bridge that gap is not, I think, a professional way for us to support those people. I know that has been an ongoing challenge, but will the consultation look at such issues?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Lady raises a really important point. We have a clear manifesto commitment to review universal credit, tackle poverty and make work pay. That issue has been raised a lot with me and the Minister for Social Security and Disability. I am sure that he will look closely at that. We need our benefits system to match the reality of people's working lives today.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): I very much commend the Secretary of State for the youth guarantee. In my constituency, many businesses have invested in the hi-tech industries of the future. However, I speak to young people and their families who are concerned about those young people getting jobs on the first rung of the ladder. This year, there will be 3,000 undergraduates graduating from the University of Reading, and a further 3,000 people turning 18 in my constituency. What can the Secretary of State and her Department do for those young people to ensure that local jobs and training opportunities match the economic advantages of the area they are from?

Liz Kendall: I personally believe that we need to start much younger than 18, with good work experience and careers advice in schools. I have certainly seen that in my constituency; even in primary schools, teachers have brought in people with different jobs, in different professions, to open children's eyes and minds to the possibilities of the world of work. We need to bring together everything that is happening in our schools, colleges and the world of work. That is how we open up possibilities for young people. I hope that the youth guarantee will do precisely that in local areas and provide the opportunities that my hon. Friend's young constituents need and deserve.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I note that the White Paper is called "Get Britain Working", not "Get the United Kingdom Working". I appreciate there are devolution issues, but when I listened to the Secretary of State's statement, I found it very England-orientated. There are references to national partnerships, but how does the White Paper fit with getting the United Kingdom working? Will there be Barnett consequentials? And will things be left up to the sometimes failing devolved institutions?

Liz Kendall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Northern Ireland has one of the highest rates of economic inactivity in the United Kingdom, which is a real concern for me, and, I am sure, for him. I have already spoken to the Minister responsible. There are things happening in Northern Ireland that we can look at to see whether there are lessons that could be learned for elsewhere in the country. We will always work closely with the devolved Administrations to ensure that our plans match people's needs in every part of the country, because that is what his constituents and the country as a whole deserve.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): Given the empty Opposition Benches, it looks like the Conservative party has adopted a policy of a three or two-day week to tackle the unemployment problem. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group. From the tone taken and the statement given today, my understanding is that the Government acknowledge that it will be support, not sanctions, that will tackle this issue overall, and that that support will come from new employment centres in our constituencies, staffed by fully trained, motivated and well-paid staff. The Secretary of State mentioned meeting businesses and mayors. May I ask that she also meets the trade unions? The PCS parliamentary group would welcome a meeting with her to talk through the roll-out of this programme, which will benefit both the staff and the recipients of their services.

Liz Kendall: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Our 16,000 work coaches and other frontline jobcentre staff are our biggest asset. Some have worked for the DWP for 25 or 30 years, because they care about their communities. They have been stifled by a system that had an overwhelming focus on monitoring and administering benefits. They know what their local areas want and need. I spoke to the head of the TUC yesterday about our plans. I am sure that either the Minister for Employment or I would be very happy to meet the PCS to talk about how we take these plans forward.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. Some 13% of jobs in Somerset are in manufacturing, and many of them are in the defence industry—in Thales in Templecombe, RNAS Yeovilton in my constituency, or Leonardo nearby. The manufacturing industry contributes £1.87 billion to our local economy, which is more than any other single industry. However, data shows that women represent only 30% of the STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—workforce. Does the Secretary of State agree that we should be making more targeted interventions to support more women into this important industry?

Liz Kendall: One hundred per cent. I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. We need to get more women into manufacturing, engineering and all those STEM subjects. I met many apprentices yesterday on a visit to Peterborough college, including young women who said, "This is for me." More women need to do this. They are great jobs and great careers, with great pay—100%.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): It is wonderful to hear from my right hon. Friend that Greater Manchester will be one of the trailblazer areas for these vital reforms. When I speak to businesses in Altrincham and Sale West, they tell me that the greatest challenge they face is recruiting people to fill vacancies. Can the Secretary of State outline a little further how these plans will ensure that businesses can recruit the skilled staff they need, and give young people in my constituency great opportunities in the process?

Liz Kendall: This is one of the biggest challenges that many employers face, and the reason that many of them are so keen on apprentices—as I was told yesterday—is that they can mould young people with the specific skills that their companies need. There are two points here. First, we are reforming the apprenticeship levy and transforming it into a new growth and skills levy, so that businesses have more flexibility in how they use it. Secondly, many young people have missed out on those basic skills of maths and English at GCSE, and cannot even get on to the apprenticeship scheme. We need that training or those foundation apprenticeships, because they are a key part of the changes that we want to make and to spread, through our youth guarantee, to areas including Greater Manchester.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): The Workways team, which is run by Carmarthenshire county council in my constituency, does impressive work in facilitating access to critical skills and giving career opportunities to people who are out of work. It has received funding through the shared prosperity fund, but that is due to end. Can the Minister tell me how such vital organisations in Wales will benefit from her Department's plans?

Liz Kendall: The whole point of devolving responsibility and accountability to mayors and local leaders is that they will know best the organisations that they need to involve in tackling economic inactivity, delivering the youth guarantee and embedding jobcentres into local communities. There is an additional £900 million in the shared prosperity fund for 2025-26, and that is a key element that we need to join up with the rest of these measures, but if the hon. Lady will write to me with more detailed information, I shall be happy to look at it.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Barriers to employment and a lack of workplace support for disabled people remain persistent challenges, along with inadequate social security payments for everyone regardless of employment status. Can my right hon. Friend reassure disabled people that the Government's new support measures will not be conditional on their being able to work, and that no one will be sanctioned for non-attendance at medical appointments?

Liz Kendall: Sanctioning people because they use the NHS to make themselves as fit and healthy as possible is completely the wrong approach. I understand why

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disabled people are worried when they hear talk about helping people into work or reforms of sickness and disability benefits—they are worried because of what has happened over the past 14 years—but we are determined to break down those barriers to work. I think that many disabled people, given the right help and support and the right flexibility to work, could work and would want to work. That is what we are focusing on, and that is what we are determined to deliver.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): A fantastic local social enterprise in my constituency has been helping adults with disabilities back into work. It recently set up a café that is run entirely by adults with learning disabilities. How does the Department plan to take evidence from innovative organisations of that kind, and will the Secretary of State meet members of this organisation to find out about the work it has been doing?

Liz Kendall: The reason I am so passionate about devolving responsibility and accountability to local areas is that it is intended to engage precisely the kind of organisation that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned. For instance, I know the various organisations in Leicester but I do not know those in his constituency, so I believe that we need a much more localised system. If he will write to me with the details, I shall be very keen to look at them.

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): Measures such as the young person’s guarantee, which are already working successfully in Wales, are welcome. Could the Secretary of State tell us a bit more about how she will work with the Welsh Government to deliver on the plan to make work pay?

Liz Kendall: As my hon. Friend says, there is already a young person’s guarantee in Wales. The jobcentre reforms will look different in Wales because the Welsh Government are responsible for the careers service, but we want to work with them and with employers to overhaul their approach, to unleash the ideas of our work coaches and free up their time to focus on those who need help the most, and to ensure that our jobcentres become the first port of call, not the last, for employers to recruit their next star employee. We want employers to be much more joined up with local skills support and health support. We will be having those conversations with the Welsh Government, and I am keen to receive my hon. Friend’s input as well.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): My constituent Diana has a daughter who has autism and lives independently with some low-level support. She previously had a part-time role while living in Bath, with help from an employment support job coach, and she wishes to do the same having now moved to my constituency. However, she has found that much harder since moving, and is yet to find similar support in Sussex. How will the Secretary of State tackle the postcode lottery that exists for those in need of extra help to get into employment?

Liz Kendall: I am very sorry to hear that Diana’s daughter has not received the level of support that she had before. It is clear that with the right support she will

be able to engage with the world of work as well as leading an independent life, which is what she wants. Our reforms are intended to ensure that such support is available everywhere. If the hon. Lady wishes to forward the details of that case, I shall be happy to take a look at them.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): It is vital that people are helped into fulfilling, well-paid work so that they can realise their potential. The Secretary of State rightly mentioned the importance that she places on discussing these changes and reforms with disabled people and disabled people’s groups. In the course of her discussions, will she ask those people and groups about the work capability assessment? Many people who visit my constituency surgery feel degraded and demeaned by the WCA tests, and many of the decisions that are made turn out to be wrong and are successfully appealed against later.

Liz Kendall: As my hon. Friend will know, that is why the manifesto on which we were all elected said that we would reform or replace the work capability assessment. People wait for that assessment, and for the personal independence payment, for an average of between 14 and 18 weeks, and about 70% of decisions on the WCA and PIP can be overturned at tribunal. We need a system that gets the decision right first time, because that is what disabled people need and deserve.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): The Secretary of State has given us some positive new spending plans today, but she has also given some mixed messages to young people, with some investment on the one hand and new conditions, which she calls responsibilities, on the other. Will she commit herself to working with and empowering young people to shape this new spending in local areas and potentially challenge any new conditions on support? I am thinking in particular of neurodiverse young people, whose perspectives are vital and who are worried about what this will mean for their wellbeing and life chances.

Liz Kendall: The White Paper will provide for a new youth employment panel so that we can genuinely engage with young people in developing our proposals. I believe that it is vital for people to be in education, employment or training when they are young, because if they are not, the impact can be lifelong. To those who lack basic skills, today’s world is brutal, and being unemployed when young can have a permanent impact on someone’s job prospects and earnings potential. Alongside genuine new opportunities, there should be a responsibility to take them up—and do you know what? I have never met a young person who did not want to work, who did not want to obtain skills, who did not want a chance. We will fulfil our side of the bargain, and meet our responsibilities to provide those opportunities. I believe that, just as they did when the last Labour Government set up the new deal for young people and the future jobs fund, young people will take up those chances.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House to announce these measures. I am pleased to see that Cambridgeshire and Peterborough has been included as one of the areas for trailblazing the new youth guarantee. On Friday, I held a roundtable with local businesses,

and one of the main themes that emerged was the lack of ability to recruit skilled people locally. Will the Secretary of State explain how these measures will help to address the situation?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I have already spoken quite a lot about changes to the apprenticeship levy, which are important, but there are many other things that we can do. We have seen real success with sector-based work academies, which are run by jobcentres. Those are short, six-week courses that give the specific skills an employer needs, alongside guaranteed work experience for the potential employee and a guaranteed interview. They have had huge success for people looking for work and for employers, because they get someone with the skills they actually need. We are committed to doing that this year, and I hope we will roll it out further. That is just one of many examples of how we can change our jobcentres and the DWP to better serve employers and their needs.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Stepping Hill hospital in Hazel Grove has a huge repairs backlog, which is reported to cost £130 million. We have had buildings knocked down because they are no longer safe, medics wading through flooded corridors and, most recently, a light fitting falling down in a delivery suite when the couple were in active labour. This situation has a massive impact on waiting lists and, consequently, on how much my residents can work, including Anthony, who got in touch yesterday to say that he is waiting for rehab after having a heart attack in June. Can the Secretary of State confirm that any extra funding will go towards what local communities need in order to get back to work? Many of my constituents are as keen as mustard to do so, but they are on waiting lists. Even the most wonderful work coach can do very little when somebody is awaiting surgery.

Liz Kendall: The hon. Lady raises a massively important point, and I am really sorry to hear about what her constituents are experiencing. We have to get people back to health and back to work. It is no wonder that so many people are out of work due to long-term sickness, given that waiting lists are at near-record levels. That is why my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary is sending in extra help, including doctors, to drive down waiting lists in the areas that need help the most. It is a no-brainer that we have to get people off waiting lists to get them back to work. That is what I mean when I say that a healthy nation and a healthy workforce are two sides of the same coin.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Thurrock Lifestyle Solutions in my constituency is an excellent example of good practice in helping disabled people enter and stay in the workplace. It is particularly successful because it embodies the maxim, "Nothing about us without us", as it is run by, led by and designed by disabled people themselves. Will the Secretary of State commit to taking such examples of best practice into consideration, and to ensuring that the voices of disabled people and those with long-term health conditions are put at the very heart of the strategy?

Liz Kendall: Yes. What my hon. Friend and many hon. Members have highlighted today are lots of individual examples of really good working, but we are not joining

them up. They are not a central part of our employment system, but they absolutely should be. We know that we need extra investment, and the Chancellor has put £240 million into this endeavour, but we are not getting the most out of the money we are spending because it is not co-ordinated and joined up. That is what we mean by delivering investment and reform together. If it is locally led and involves people who are doing all this fantastic work, we can make a really big difference.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the initiatives and recognise that this is not a problem that has been created by the Government; it has been with us for a long time and started long before July this year. Northern Ireland has the highest level of economic inactivity in the UK, despite the fact that I can think of many initiatives in my own constituency for people with learning difficulties, for apprenticeships in certain sectors, for the work of local colleges and so on. Despite all that, the problem persists—and that is in a place with almost full employment. Can the Secretary of State give an assurance that, despite a Budget that will make it more difficult to recruit, she can set objectives for the number of people she believes can be brought from unemployment into work as a result of the initiatives?

Liz Kendall: The right hon. Gentleman raises many important points. As I said earlier, it is absolutely the case that Northern Ireland has the highest level of economic inactivity in the UK. We will set clear objectives for our plans as we work with the devolved Administrations, and at local level, to get the levels of economic inactivity down. That will be challenging because, as I said earlier, only 3% of people who are economically inactive get back to work each year. We need to increase that, and the only way we can do it is by more fully joining up work, health and skills support. Too much of the focus of welfare reform over the past 14 years has been on the benefit system alone. Clearly, the benefit system can incentivise or disincentivise work. We want it to incentivise work, but we also know that we need to join up work, health and skills if we are to get every part of the United Kingdom working again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): This statement will run until 3 o'clock, so short questions and short answers would be very helpful.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): It is a sad reality that there are fewer people in work today than in 2019, before the pandemic, so I am under no illusions about the scale of the challenge. When I talk to young people in Welwyn Hatfield, the thing that most concerns me is that they often cite problems with their mental health as being a barrier to getting into work or progressing in work. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that she will work in lockstep with the Health Secretary? We on the Labour Benches understand that investment in a healthy workforce is a down payment on future prosperity for us all.

Liz Kendall: In the interests of brevity, yes.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): St Neots in my constituency is the largest town in Cambridgeshire, and it does not have a jobcentre; residents have to travel up to Huntingdon each week for their benefits. In the absence of a jobcentre, social enterprise

[*Ian Sollom*]

has taken place. Last week I attended the launch of the St Neots citizen hub, which aims to connect individuals with opportunities and employers with talent. It provides a safe space in the heart of the community to address the fundamental issues of skills gaps—including life skills—social isolation and financial insecurity, and it is a great example of the new model for jobcentres. Will the Secretary of State ensure that staff at the jobcentre in Huntingdon can come down for one day a week so that residents do not have to keep making the journey up to Huntingdon?

Liz Kendall: That is a really important point. We want to see more of our work coaches going to where people are, rather than always expecting them to come in. If all that help and support is being provided at the St Neots citizen hub, it sounds like exactly the sort of place where our work coaches should be based, and I will certainly bring that up with them.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): These changes are fantastic and are much needed to get Britain back to work after 14 years of dismissal and neglect of real lives and real people under the last Government. However, areas such as Portsmouth North do not have a devolution deal yet. Can the Secretary of State provide details on how those not in work in Portsmouth North will be able to get support and get back into work, and on how we can make our jobcentre accessible, to lift children out of poverty and to lift people back into the community?

Liz Kendall: I reassure my hon. Friend that it is the same for me and my city—we do not have a devolution deal. We are overhauling our jobcentres, and tackling economic inactivity with local “Get Britain Working” plans and our youth guarantee. Regardless of whether people are part of a mayoral or combined authority, that work will be led locally, including through the local council. We are determined to deliver in every corner of the country, because we believe that everybody deserves an opportunity to work. That is what our country needs to get growing again.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Steven Tysoe from east Devon used to be a Metropolitan police officer in London, and he showed me footage of his involvement in the riots in the capital over a decade ago. He was severely injured and was regarded by the DWP as disabled. Under the new right of disabled people to work, will the Secretary of State ensure that public servants who have been injured in the line of duty will not get hounded repeatedly by assessors?

Liz Kendall: I do not want to see people being hounded. If they are able to work, I want them to get the support they need to do that. That is the big challenge that we face. There are more disabled people working than ever before, but for many others their conditions might fluctuate and the world of work and the benefit system need to understand that. I am interested in providing people with support not hounding them—there should of course be conditions and responsibility within the social security system, as has been the case since it was

set up—and I hope that is not happening to the hon. Gentleman’s constituent. If it is, perhaps he will write and tell me more about it.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): Those who can work should work, but so should the support services. I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement on transforming that public service, which embraces many of the principles of the work done by the Local Government Association on “Work Local”. In Telford and Wrekin, where I was council leader, we were driving down youth unemployment under the previous Government, but we were expected to pay a charge to the DWP to share data. Will the Secretary of State assure me that that will not happen under these plans to work local?

Liz Kendall: It seems to me to be completely the wrong approach to put barriers in the way of data sharing. Some of the best innovations—I am thinking particularly of Barnsley council—have shared data between the health service, the jobcentre and the DWP about people facing barriers to work and what needs to happen to put that right. We have to enable that to happen everywhere. I want to tear down those barriers, not put more up, so I will definitely take away that issue.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I welcome the innovation and energy in the White Paper. It will make a huge difference to people and businesses across the country. In relation to the welcome announcement of eight trailblazer schemes, can the Secretary of State set out how young people in areas without mayoral combined authorities will see support, including my residents in Dartford and across the Thames estuary, where we want to see the fair growth that the Government are offering?

Liz Kendall: I 100% want young people, and all my hon. Friend’s constituents in Dartford, to have the same chances. As I said earlier, I do not have a combined authority in my city, so I am acutely aware of this issue. This will be for local councils to lead. They will be developing local “Get Britain Working” plans. They will be the responsible and accountable body over our youth guarantee. We have to deliver this everywhere because talent is everywhere but opportunity is not, and that is what we all came into politics to change.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): This is a momentous White Paper by a momentous Secretary of State. Yesterday, I had the great privilege to take my right hon. Friend to Peterborough college to meet excellent businesses and apprentices doing brilliant work, including EML, Baker Perkins, Taylor Rose, Codem and Gen Phoenix. Those businesses and learners are excelling in a system that has failed too many of our young people. Apprenticeships are down and youth unemployment is up in my city. Can my right hon. Friend tell us how quickly we can get going on these new trailblazers?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for an amazing visit yesterday, and I hope he will pass on my thanks to Rachel at the local college and to all the local businesses and apprentices. I agree with him: the number of apprenticeship starts for young people dropped by 38% under the previous Government’s apprenticeship levy, and in Peterborough more than 1,350 young people are claiming benefits, with the majority not in work, so we must act swiftly, and we will. These programmes are

starting immediately in the new year. I look forward to working with him and all those businesses and the college in Peterborough to put our plans into action, because we are determined to deliver.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and to the work that I did prior to entering this place. It is difficult enough for a disabled person to enter employment; it is even more difficult for a disabled person to remain in employment if the employers are not aware of or not accommodating their disabilities and the reasonable adjustments that they might need. Within the debate on this White Paper, will the Secretary of State ensure that the work of exemplar employers is picked up and credited? There must be a recognition of the value that disabled people can bring to all workplaces. I also invite her to come and meet my old team in the employability service within NHS Lanarkshire, who have worked not just with Project Search but with disabled—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I call the Secretary of State.

Liz Kendall: The issue that my hon. Friend raises is so important, and Sir Charlie Mayfield, who will be running our "Keep Britain Working" review, will indeed look at best practice among some great employers who understand what needs to happen to help disabled people get work and stay in work. If my hon. Friend writes to me about that exemplar working, I will make sure that he sees it.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Yesterday I was proud to host a reception from the Royal National Institute of Blind People, at which I heard that, across the UK, people with failing eyesight are not getting the support they need from the health service, from local authorities or from employers, and that they are falling out of work because of this. Can this be addressed as part of the programme being outlined today?

Liz Kendall: We will certainly speak to the RNIB to ensure that those points are included as we take our "Get Britain Working" White Paper forward.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): If we search the record of this place, we see the phrase "no child left behind" mentioned over and over again, but during the pandemic, children were left behind. They have been washing up on the shores of social work, of the police sometimes, and of childhood mental health services, and I know from visiting my jobcentre in Barrhead that they are now washing up on its shores as well. What will this White Paper do to help that covid generation who were left behind?

Liz Kendall: When I visited my jobcentre in Leicester after being appointed to the work and pensions role in opposition, the very first thing its manager said to me was that the big problem was young people and mental health—the covid generation. They deserve more opportunities to earn and to learn. The country must do this. For me, the most concerning problem that we face is the rapid increase in young people not in education, training or employment. We know that we can deliver

the youth guarantee, as we did the new deal for young people and the future jobs fund when we were last in government. This is a version of that, facing the problems of today and tomorrow to give that pandemic generation the chances and choices they need to build a better life.

Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): May I start by welcoming the statement and the White Paper? The Secretary of State has confirmed that we are the party of work. There is so much good stuff in the statement and the White Paper, including reforms to jobcentres, the youth guarantee and joined-up health and job support, but I particularly welcome the talk of a right to work. Disabled constituents tell me that they are desperate to get into employment but cannot find employers who meet their needs. Without knowing the specifics, what general assurances can my right hon. Friend give those constituents that they will be able to find work under this White Paper?

Liz Kendall: This Government understand the importance of whether the benefit system incentivises or disincentivises work, but we must also address people's skills, the barriers to work, including for disabled people, and the need to work much more closely with employers so that they understand the benefits of keeping people in work or getting them back to work. This is a huge agenda, and I think the DWP has been too centralised and too siloed in not joining up all this support. Our work coaches are desperate to make this happen, and under these reform programmes that is exactly what we will do.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that supporting people into work, through Government action nationally and, of course, locally, is an important part of being pro-business? Will she expand briefly on how the measures she has set out will benefit businesses of all sizes in my constituency, and will she reassure them that we are not only the party of work but a pro-business party?

Liz Kendall: Businesses in Rugby and across the country always say that they are desperate to recruit people with the right skills. If they do not have the right people, they will not be able to expand and thrive. This is a pro-business strategy to get Britain working again, so that we get Britain growing again. My hon. Friend the Minister for Employment says that we are the human resources department of the growth mission. I hope businesses in Rugby will see that and work with us to make sure we get it right.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly congratulate the Secretary of State on all her hard work to deliver this White Paper, which proves not only that hers is a Department for work but that Labour is the party of work. Whereas, judging from the sea of green opposite, the Tories are a party of slackers.

I warmly welcome the fact that Greater Manchester is one of the trailblazer areas. What is the Secretary of State most excited about in Andy Burnham's plan to help tackle this massive problem in Greater Manchester?

Liz Kendall: Under Andy Burnham's leadership, Greater Manchester is pioneering some of the changes that we want to see by fundamentally joining up work, health and skills support, by commissioning new talking therapy

services for people seeking work, and by creating a new service to broker connections between jobseekers and employers. This will make sure that employers get the staff they need while also making the necessary adjustments.

We want to build on that and expand it, because we are indeed the party of work. We believe that work

brings self-respect, dignity, control and improved living standards. I am very proud of that, and I hope and believe that these reforms will deliver in every corner of this great nation, so that we invest not just in Great Britain but in great Britons—this country’s greatest asset.

Point of Order

3.1 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions on 28 October, the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) asked the Foreign Secretary whether he believes a genocide is taking place in the middle east. In his reply, the Foreign Secretary appeared to suggest not, partly because not enough people had lost their lives.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I understand that you are not responsible for answers from the Dispatch Box, which is why, on 31 October, I wrote to the Foreign Secretary seeking urgent clarification of what he meant. On 1 November, I also wrote to the Attorney General asking that he immediately clarify the Government's position and confirm that there had been no change in how the UK Government interpret the genocide convention.

As of this afternoon, I have had no reply to my correspondence from either the Foreign Secretary or the Attorney General. I therefore seek your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how I can get a reply to what I and many others regard as a matter of the utmost importance.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. He is absolutely correct when he says that I am not responsible for the content of Ministers' answers; nor indeed am I for their responses to correspondence from hon. Members. However, I must say that all hon. Members are entitled to expect timely responses to their letters to Ministers, and I am sure those on the Treasury Bench will have noted his comments this afternoon.

Treatment of Terminal Illness

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

3.3 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the liability of practitioners, and of the organisation which employs the practitioner, where a practitioner prescribes an unlicensed medicine to or carries out a non-standard treatment on a person who is terminally ill; to make provision about the import, storage and use of equipment and unlicensed medicines for the purpose of such prescriptions or such treatment; and for connected purposes.

Advances in medical science wait for no man or woman—unless, of course, they are one of the thousands of people in the UK each year diagnosed with a rare cancer. In that case, they are likely to receive NHS treatment that has remained unchanged for more than 30 years, with no improvement in outcomes, no access to drug trials and no access to the huge progress that has been made in individualised cancer vaccines or immunotherapy.

It does not have to be that way. In Germany, medical practitioners can offer experimental treatments to patients with a terminal diagnosis without fear that they, or the organisations that employ them, will be held liable or penalised. They can offer patients a lifeline that doctors in the UK are not allowed to offer. I am introducing this Bill to protect clinicians in the same way and to allow patients access to the latest medical treatments.

In truth, we know this ten-minute rule Bill has no prospect of becoming law. However, it serves another purpose: to give a voice to the thousands of terminally ill patients and the ordeal they are forced to endure in search of a lifeline; to expose the culture of fear among medical professionals in the NHS surrounding individualised treatment; and to suggest a better way forward.

Excuse my German pronunciation, but *Individuelle Heilversuche* is the German law that allows doctors to provide personalised, individual treatment plans. When a terminally ill patient has run out of traditional treatment options, medical practitioners can use treatments that have not been fully approved, or that have been approved for other purposes, as part of individual treatment programmes. They are able to prescribe drugs for off-label use—drugs that are known to save lives but are not yet available to patients with a specific condition. How can it be right not to offer the same rights to patients in the UK? Instead, the NHS—and healthcare in general—abandons them to die when the outdated and inadequate standard care fails. Understandably, many fight and take the hard choice to travel internationally—in this case, to Germany—to find the treatments denied to them in their own country.

I know this path, as I walked it with my sister. I held her head as she was sick into a bin on the concourse at Heathrow airport's terminal 5. I obscured her from flight attendants in fear that they would take her off the plane, and that we would not get to Düsseldorf. One night, I wondered how I would explain her death in a foreign city, in a country where I did not speak the language or understand the emergency care. But I would do it all again, because I wanted to extend her life and there was nothing for her here in the UK.

[*Dame Siobhain McDonagh*]

We were lucky that we could pay for it. Thousands of people are currently following the same difficult path. For some, it is harder because they do not have the money. At a time of great distress, they are forced to sell their homes, run marathons or bake cakes to fund the treatment their loved one needs. Many are forced to travel alone because their partner cannot afford to go with them or cannot afford to take their children.

Laura was diagnosed with a glioblastoma when she was just 18. A first-year student at King's College London, she was told that she had just 12 months to live under the standard care available through the NHS. For Laura's family, this was just not good enough. In Germany, they found an individualised treatment plan that helped Laura to live four and a half years past her diagnosis, defying the mere 12 months that oncologists in the UK had given her.

Before she lost her battle with cancer, Laura completed her degree and a wonderful bucket list, including crossing the equator, presenting the weather and meeting Michelle Obama. This decision to travel overseas for highly expensive treatment is not to be taken lightly, but I ask the House the same question that Laura's indomitable mum, Nicola, asked her oncologist, "What would you do if this was your child?"

When Zoe, a 35-year-old secondary school teacher with two young sons, was diagnosed with a grade 4 cancer, she found the NHS treatment available seemed old-fashioned and out of date. Her oncologist was against trying anything different, despite telling her she had just 15 months to live. Zoe was able to access experimental treatment in Germany—treatment that research has since highlighted results in an increase in survival time. She passed away two years after her diagnosis, but critically was able to access treatment that did not affect her quality of life, something that cannot be said for the treatment that would have been available in the UK.

Zoe's husband told me:

"When you are handed a death sentence, your risk appetite changes."

Zoe, along with the countless other patients who have reached out to me with a range of cancers and terminal illnesses, whose stories I wish I could share with the House, should never have had to travel for her treatment.

Margaret should never have had to travel. We know that in many cases individual treatment has been proven to lead to people surviving for far longer than their original prognosis. I can say with confidence that it did so for Margaret. It provides hope that we simply do not get from our current health system. That is why I propose we extend the opportunity of individual treatment programmes to the thousands of people with a terminal diagnosis in the UK. We must end the cruel practice of forcing our most vulnerable to travel overseas to access better care, at huge expense.

It is clear that legislation is needed to protect our doctors and to allow them to progress with the best standard of care. At the very least, we need to end the culture of fear among medical professionals in this country with regard to experimental and individual treatments, so that they can inform their patients of options that could lengthen their life expectancy. As Zoe's husband said to me:

"Patients do not want the fatalism that many in this field have. Realism is fine, but no-one has the right to remove hope from a patient."

This Bill would bring that hope back to thousands of people.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Dame Siobhain McDonagh, Jim Shannon, Uma Kumaran, Peter Lamb, Luke Murphy, Rachael Maskell, Tonia Antoniazzi, Valerie Vaz, Mary Glendon, Sorcha Eastwood, Helena Dollimore and Natasha Irons present the Bill.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 17 January, and to be printed (Bill 139).

Tobacco and Vapes Bill

Second Reading

3.13 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Today, across the UK, 350 young people aged 25 and under will take up smoking. It is a decision that the vast majority will later regret. They will try to quit again and again, but most will not be able to break their addiction. They will suffer strokes, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, stillbirth, dementia or asthma as a direct result of smoking. For two in three of those young people, the habit they are beginning today will eventually kill them.

Smoking takes 80,000 lives a year and causes one in four deaths from cancer in England, a hospital admission almost every minute and 100 GP appointments an hour. It is the leading cause of sickness, disability and death in our country. And today, Members of this House can consign it to the history books.

The Bill before the House will raise the legal age of the purchase of tobacco by one year every year, creating the first smokefree generation and, eventually, a smokefree nation. The Bill will enable the Government to extend the current indoor smoking ban to certain outdoor settings, and we will consult on banning smoking outside schools and hospitals and in playgrounds, protecting children and vulnerable people from the harms of second-hand smoke.

The Bill will come down on the vaping industry like a ton of bricks, to prevent a new generation of children and young people from getting hooked on nicotine. Taken together, these measures add up to the most significant public health intervention in a generation. They are a giant leap in this Government's mission to build a healthy society and, in doing so, they will help to build a more healthy economy too.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can the Secretary of State imagine the plight of a shop assistant, some decades hence, when a middle-aged or elderly person presents themselves seeking to buy a packet of cigarettes? Is that shop assistant really expected to demand their bone fides?

Wes Streeting: I can not only imagine it, but I recently experienced a similar situation. There I was in Barking-side Sainsbury's one evening, only weeks ago, buying a bottle of wine to have with dinner and, to my surprise, I was asked for my ID. I am afraid it is just a burden that those of us with youthful vim and vigour in our early 40s have to bear, and it is a price I am willing to pay—for good moisturiser. However, there is a serious point. Along with many others that I am sure we will encounter during the passage of the Bill, this is one of the cynical arguments being deployed by the mendacious smoking lobby, which would have us believe that, decades hence, there will be people who are at the margins—one aged 41 and one aged 40, for example—being asked for ID on the sale of cigarettes. The point is that the Bill will create a smokefree generation. Young people growing up in our country today will not be smokers, because we will have stopped the start. We will do everything we

can to support adults who are currently smoking, because the vast majority want to break the habit but struggle to do so.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): If only proof of age was still asked of me.

The Secretary of State knows that I support the Bill and will vote for it this evening, but he will know that rural pubs are increasingly marginal in their operations. He has referred to further powers, post consultation, that may stop smoking outside in particular places once the Bill is on the statute book. Will he put the minds of rural MPs, from across the House, at rest by saying that he does not envisage at any point, either now or post-Royal Assent, the inclusion of a ban on smoking outside rural pubs? That would be a further nail in their business model at a time when we need them.

Wes Streeting: I was going to address that point later in my speech, but let me address it now. It is not often that a Government comment on leaks or welcome the events following a leak; I do not want to encourage future leaks, either. However, it is well known and a matter of accurate reporting, in this case, that we were considering an extension of the ban on outdoor smoking to include outdoor hospitality, including pubs, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. Because of that leak, representations were heard from Members from across the House, including the hon. Gentleman, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and others. We took those representations very seriously because we know the hospitality industry has been through a torrid time, and not just in rural communities. I accept that rural pubs face a big challenge, but even high street pubs in towns and cities are struggling.

Our approach to public health always has to weigh up the upside benefits to public health against the downside consequences elsewhere. It is not in the national interest to see our high streets further suffer, so I reassure the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and the hospitality industry—although I think it feels reassured on this already—that we will not be consulting on extending the powers to outdoor hospitality spaces. I hope that reassures people, as we embark on consultation on the measures that I am outlining today, that the Government listen, engage and consult seriously. Consultation is genuine with this Government.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I will not comment on how young I look, but I still get asked for ID when buying non-alcoholic wine.

It is 10 years since the smoking ban came into operation and there are 1.9 million fewer smokers in the UK. Does that show the Secretary of State the difference that a Government that take the matter seriously can make?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am really proud of the impact that the last Labour Government made in reducing smoking harms and the prevalence of smoking in our country.

That brings me on to the next point that I wanted to make. President Truman famously said that it is amazing what you can accomplish

“if you do not care who gets the credit.”

[*Wes Streeting*]

When I first sat down with Rachel Sylvester of *The Times* in January 2023 and flew a kite to start a debate that a Labour Government might introduce a ban on children and young people today ever buying cigarettes, of the type introduced by our sister party in New Zealand, I was not necessarily convinced my own side would buy it, but I thought it was a debate worth having. I never imagined, in a million years, that I would tune into a Conservative party conference speech by a Conservative Prime Minister announcing his intention to legislate for such a ban. I will do something I do not often do with Conservative party conference speeches and quote extensively—and approvingly—what the then Prime Minister said.

“As Prime Minister I have an obligation to do what I think is the right thing for our country in the long term. And as Conservatives, we have never shirked that responsibility.”

I say that bit through gritted teeth.

“We have always been at the front of society, leading it—”

Who wrote this?

“And when we have the tools at our disposal...to do for our children what we all, in our heart of hearts, know is right, we must act, we must lead...we must put the next generation first.”

In that spirit, I pay tribute to the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), for picking up the proposal and running with it despite opposition from his own party. That took courage. While we have taken steps to improve this Bill compared with the one put forward by the previous Government, I hope that hon. and right hon. Members on the Conservative Benches will follow his lead, showing that the one nation tradition still has a constituency in the modern Conservative party, and vote for this Bill in the national interest.

The Darzi investigation into the NHS set out the twin challenges facing me, my Department and this Government. The national health service is broken; it is going through the worst crisis in its history. At the point we came into office, waiting lists stood at 7.6 million. We had worse cancer survival rates than most comparable countries, ambulances not arriving on time, the number of GPs falling and dentistry deserts across the country.

Some of the most shocking findings in Lord Darzi's report, however, were about not the sickness in our NHS, but the sickness in our nation. Children are less healthy today than they were a decade ago. Life expectancy was extended by three and a half years over the course of the last Labour Government, but in the past 14 years, it has grown by just four months. Brits now live shorter lives than people in any other country in western Europe, and we spend fewer years living in good health, becoming sicker sooner. Those are huge costs, borne by all of us as individuals. It means less time in which we are able to live our lives to the full, to do all the things we love and to spend time with the people we love. Sickness is forcing many of us out of work long before retirement age, leaving us dependent on welfare, ridding us of the purpose and belonging that work provides, and for everyone else, it means higher costs to us as taxpayers. Our sick society is holding back our economy, and that is why we should act.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Wes Streeting: I give way to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Layla Moran: In the spirit of cross-party working, I want to congratulate Members on the Conservative Benches for deciding, when the former Prime Minister put this policy forward, that it was a priority. It shows how important it is that No. 10 gets behind this kind of thing, and I hope we learn that lesson for the Government's missions.

I gently say, however, that it is not just the evil tobacco lobby that has concerns about the age escalator. I completely agree with everything that the Secretary of State says, but if smoking is that much of an issue, why are we not just banning it for those under an age of, say, 25? That would have been another way to go. What is the thinking behind an age escalator, as opposed to a ban for those under a particular age so that people do not need new ID every time?

Wes Streeting: I recognise that there are people who have the freedom and the liberty to smoke today, the vast majority of whom, by the way, want to stop and struggle to do so. That is why we are announcing support to enable people to do that, with £70 million of investment in smoking cessation services. That is important, but for a future where people are no longer able to smoke, a phased approach is the right thing to do. It is also essential for the health of the individual, the nation and our economy.

Since 2018, our productivity has dropped by £25 billion due to worsening health alone. Some 900,000 more people are off work than would have been on pre-pandemic trends. That is more people than are employed by Tesco, Sainsbury's and Asda put together. Smoking alone accounts for more than £18 billion in lost productivity. The rising tide of ill health, coupled with our ageing society, presents an existential challenge to our health service. If we do not act now, ever-increasing demands for healthcare threaten to overwhelm and bankrupt the NHS. That is the choice that we face.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Surely the Secretary of State realises that banning things rarely works. When tobacco was banned in South Africa during the covid pandemic, 95% of the trade went underground. Surely we should be promoting the concept of freedom with responsibility and allowing people to make choices about their own lives. I am glad that he goes shopping in Barkingside—he should go and speak to the shopkeepers in Collier Row, where local retailers will lose a lot of potential business if the ban comes in.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful for the intervention, because I anticipate that there will be similar arguments made from the Opposition Benches, particularly from a right-wing libertarian perspective. I want to engage seriously with those arguments.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Wes Streeting: I will just respond to the point made by the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell).

There is no liberty in addiction; there is no freedom in addiction. The logical extension of the libertarian argument the hon. Gentleman puts forward would be the end of the ban on indoor smoking. If we should

take a live and let live approach, why not legalise cannabis? Why not legalise cocaine? We prescribe certain harmful substances, and there is, I think, an unanswerable case on tobacco because it is uniquely addictive and uniquely harmful. That is why we will take a tougher approach with this harmful substance than we would with something such as alcohol, or other harms such as gambling.

Jonathan Davies: The Secretary of State stole my line when he said that there is no freedom in addiction. I just want to thank him for his pragmatic approach to the hospitality industry, which has made representations to me on this matter. May I also impress on him that vapes are a valuable quitting aid for many adults, but many young people are now taking to vaping when they have never actually smoked at all? Can he say a little bit more about how we will address that?

Wes Streeting: I will certainly come on to the action that we are taking on vaping, and the case for it. I welcome the contribution that my hon. Friend has made in his first few months as a Member of this House. He brings enormous expertise and experience, particularly on health, which we very much value here in the Chamber.

One choice would be to continue paying an ever heavier price for failure. That is the road that we were heading down, under the previous Government. Our NHS already takes £4 for every £10 spent by the Government day to day. We are on course to go from being a nation with a national health service to a health service with a nation attached to it. It is projected that by the end of this Parliament, 4.3 million people will be on sickness benefit if we fail to act. Smoking could cause 300,000 patients to be diagnosed with cancer over the next five years, including 3,000 for whom that is the result of exposure to second-hand smoke. That is what happens if we only ever treat the symptoms of ill health. We end up spending more on the NHS than ever before, but with worse care for patients, a ballooning welfare bill due to more and more people being out of work, stagnant economic growth, and the heaviest tax burden in 70 years. In short, we will be paying more, but getting less.

Britain is like a ship with a hole. We are constantly battling to chuck enough water overboard to keep us afloat, as more and more floods in. We must break out of this cycle. Britain can break out of this cycle, but only if we are serious about tackling the causes of ill health, and shift our focus from treating the symptoms to preventing them. Plugging the hole in the ship is how we get back to growth, how we reduce the burden of taxation, and how we ensure that this Government can intrude more lightly on people's lives.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): The argument that the Secretary of State puts forward is essentially one for banning smoking altogether. What he said earlier was misleading; he suggested that people of a particular age group will not be able to smoke. They will not be able to buy cigarettes, but they can still smoke. They can cadge cigarettes off other people. Is this not a half-baked measure?

Wes Streeting: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman was not accusing me of misleading the House. The argument that he puts forward is used against all sorts

of laws and prohibitions. Most people in this country are law-abiding citizens who follow the law. In my constituency today, there will be people dumping fridges and mattresses on street corners—fly-tipping—because they are irresponsible and not law-abiding citizens. We will not always catch them, either through closed-circuit television or local authority enforcement, but that does not mean that we should not tackle them when they do those things.

By phasing in a generational smoking ban, we are taking a measured and reasonable way of creating a smokefree country. That is the right way to proceed, and it is sensible. I know that he does not agree, but he must accept the trade-off—the choices that he is making for the Opposition. First, he is accepting that people will pay a higher price for their healthcare, either through taxes, if he still believes in the national health service, or through the cost to the individual of their healthcare. Secondly, he must concede that, through the harm caused by smoking, he is fuelling welfare dependency. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions had a point when she said earlier that Labour is the party of work, and the Conservatives are the party of welfare. That is the logical conclusion of the hon. Gentleman's opposition.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on introducing this once-in-a generation public health measure. As he acknowledges, too many people are dying young from the effects of smoking. They are losing out on being grandparents and on the opportunity to live a long and healthy life. Smoking is a leading cause of health inequality, so does he agree that the proposals will help close the shocking gap in life expectancy between the rich and poor?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am afraid that one of my first experiences of death was watching my grandmother die a very long, slow, painful death from lung cancer as a result of a life of chain smoking. That is the consequence of this cruel addiction. People who start smoking come to regret it. They struggle to stop, and I am afraid that the stolen years that they could have spent with children and grandchildren are only part of the cost. Part of my argument today, particularly to some Opposition Members, is about better use of public money and reducing the taxation burden. Other arguments, too, may have some currency with Members who might be opposed to these measures for libertarian reasons. We should not forget for a moment the impact of this cruel addiction and the harms caused by smoking on people's quality of life, family life, and memories.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD) *rose*—

Wes Streeting: I must make progress, otherwise we will not hear from anyone else in this debate—and I think that it will be a debate.

Taking action requires a reforming Government who are unafraid to take on the orthodoxies of both the right and the left. As I said, my right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary is today proposing radical reforms to the welfare system. Earlier this month, I set out a package of reforms to drive better productivity in the NHS. Today, we are proposing the biggest public health reform in a generation: phasing out smoking for the next generation by raising the legal age at which

[*Wes Streeting*]

tobacco can be sold by one year every year, so that anyone aged 15 and under today will never legally be sold cigarettes. That will phase out smoking altogether.

Almost 20 years ago, the last Labour Government introduced the ban on smoking indoors in public places, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) said. We heard many of the same arguments, frankly, from opponents of that measure as we hear from opponents of the Bill today. They are free to correct me if I am wrong, but I do not think that Opposition Members who oppose the Bill are also proposing scrapping the indoor smoking ban. We have political consensus on the issue because of its success. The year after the ban came into force in 2007, hospital admissions for heart attacks dropped by 1,200. Admissions for children with asthma had been rising by 5% a year before the ban. After it was introduced, admissions fell by 18% in just three years. Since 2007, smoking rates have been cut by over a third, and as our understanding of second-hand smoke grew, the ban sparked a cultural change. People no longer thought it acceptable to smoke in front of their children, and many stepped outside, even in their own homes. It is time to build on that success.

No smoker intends to cause harm to others, but that is unintentionally what they do through second-hand smoke. The harms from second-hand smoke are less than from actively smoking, but the evidence shows they are still substantial. If people can smell smoke, they are inhaling it. Smoke near schools and playgrounds exposes children to smoke. Hospitals, by definition, have high numbers of medically vulnerable people on their grounds. The Bill will allow Government to extend the ban on indoor smoking to certain outdoor settings, and we will consult on banning smoking outside schools, playgrounds and hospitals to protect children and the most vulnerable.

As we act to prevent harms from smoking, we must also tackle the rising problem of youth vaping. It has more than doubled in the last five years, and one in four 11 to 15-year-olds tried vaping last year. A new generation of children is getting hooked on nicotine, and there should be no doubt about the cause, and no illusion that this has happened by accident. On any high street in the country, we can see shop windows filled with brightly coloured packaging for vapes, with flavours like blue razz lemonade and tongue twisters sour apple. Those products are designed, made, packaged, marketed and sold deliberately to children. This industry has cynically targeted its harmful products to kids.

Action is long overdue. We promised to stamp out youth vaping in our manifesto, and the Bill delivers the change that we promised. It will close loopholes that allow vapes to be sold or given away to children, provide powers to regulate the flavours, packaging and display of vapes, and introduce on-the-spot fines of £200 for under-age sales. Just as we took action on the advertising and sponsorship of tobacco products, we will bring the law into line for vaping products, too.

Wera Hobhouse: I do not know whether the Secretary of State will still be in the Chamber when I talk about Spice-spiked vapes. I see a gap in the Bill: it does not talk about refills. The harmful practice of spiking vapes

with Spice comes from the refills. I hope that the Government will listen to my concerns and be flexible, as they have already shown themselves to be in other places. Perhaps, during the passage of the Bill, we can include something about refills. Would he agree to that?

Wes Streeting: We want to work in a genuinely collaborative and cross-party way, and I know that is true right across the House. As I look at the Opposition Benches, including Conservative Benches, I see long-standing campaigners for action on smoking and vaping. We want to listen and engage.

I feel strongly about the matter, as does the Prime Minister. In our manifesto, we set out Labour's mission to improve the health of the nation. We will be far better served as a country if this is a truly national mission, and if we come together in common cause for action on public health.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) *rose*—

Wes Streeting: In that spirit, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman—and then to some of my hon. Friends.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Can the Secretary of State tell us if there is any place for vapes as a step-down, in the context of the addictive aspects of tobacco? I seem to remember that when vaping first came along, it was heralded as a way to help wean people from their tobacco addictions. Sadly, it has turned into something else, as he describes, and starts children on the road towards nicotine addiction, but does it have a role as a step-down?

Wes Streeting: The right hon. Member is right to make that distinction. As a stop-smoking tool, vaping has a part to play. For smokers, vaping is a better alternative—a route away from smoking. We do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. What we are interested in tackling is the scourge of youth vaping and the extent to which young people have been cynically addicted. It is important to say that we do not yet know the full extent of the harms caused by vaping, but we do know two things: first, it is better to vape than to smoke—that is why we are striking the balance in this legislation—and secondly, vapes are harmful. Ask any teacher in the country; they will talk about the signs of nicotine addiction that they see in their pupils, and about having to monitor school toilets to stop children congregating to vape. It is urgent and necessary to act today to protect this generation of kids from a new addiction, and that is exactly what we will do.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): As an ear, nose and throat surgeon, I can attest to the absolutely desperate trouble that cigarettes have caused over many generations. Implementing this measure is one of the best things that this Parliament could possibly do, and I expect that the measure will be widely supported all over the House. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for introducing it.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, not least because of the expertise that he brings to the House as a clinician. We are well served by his expertise in debates on the health of the nation.

Opposite me sit many opponents of the Bill and of the Government's prevention agenda. I acknowledge that their opposition is based on genuine, sincere beliefs

about the limits of government and the size of the state, but I appeal to them by saying that the Bill is in the national interest and, ironically, in their ideological interest.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the Secretary of State for making a number of times the point that this is a truly national Bill that applies across the United Kingdom. I thank him for including Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the measures. When we in this place consider measures to promote health, we should do so equally for the entirety of the United Kingdom.

Wes Streeting: That is a very helpful intervention because it gives me the opportunity to say thank you to my counterparts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This is a genuinely four-nations Bill, and through it, we have an opportunity to create a smokefree generation in every corner of our country.

I say to people who have an ideological objection to the Bill that if they believe in lower taxes, as they say they do, and in maintaining a national health service, as they say they do, they cannot duck this simple equation: an ageing population plus a sicker society equals more spending on the NHS, paid through higher taxes. The Bill is just one measure, but it will make a significant difference to the health of our society, and to the balance of that equation.

The question that opponents of the Bill must answer is this: if they want our health and care services to continue having to spend £3 billion every year on the symptoms of smoking, are they willing to accept that that means higher taxes or higher healthcare charges for their constituents? Are they happy for their constituents to shoulder the welfare bill for smokers falling out of the workforce? Those are the consequences of what we are voting on today. Higher taxes and higher welfare are not the Labour way.

There are arguments about liberty from those who oppose based on libertarian belief. They say that the state should not deny individuals the choice to smoke if they want to, but three quarters of smokers want to stop and wish they had never started. It takes a smoker an average of 30 attempts to quit before they manage it. By definition, an addict is not free; there is no choice, no liberty and no freedom in addiction. Nor is choice afforded to anyone inhaling second-hand smoke. Tobacco is not only highly addictive but uniquely harmful. Yes, some smokers can quit, but most who want to cannot. Those who have help to quit are three times more likely to succeed. That is why the Government are, as I said, investing £70 million in smoking cessation services—an investment that will pay for itself several times over—but prevention is better than cure, and that is why we are taking action, through the Bill, to stop the start.

In conclusion, this Bill marks the start of a decade in which we will shift the focus of healthcare from treatment to prevention; take serious action on not just smoking, but obesity; reform the NHS, so that it catches problems earlier and gives patients the tools that they need to stay out of hospital; harness the revolution taking place in life sciences; and fundamentally transform the NHS, so that it predicts illness and prevents it from ever taking hold. That is the future available to us, and it is the future we must realise if we are going to put our welfare system, health service and public finances on a sustainable footing. It starts with this Bill. Smokers are more likely

to need NHS services, be admitted to hospital, drop out of the workforce and on to welfare, and need social care years earlier than if they did not smoke. By taking the measures set out in the Bill, we are putting the UK on the road to becoming smokefree, building a healthier, wealthier nation with a health service fit for the future and leading the world as we do so. I commend this Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

3.45 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I do not always do this, but I express my gratitude to the Secretary of State for the tone he has adopted in this debate and for recognising the strongly and sincerely held views of right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of it. I am also grateful to him for being typically willing to share with the House in support of his points something as personal as what happened to his grandmother. Sadly, it will not surprise him that no one asks me for my ID these days—I will have to take some tips from him on the moisturiser that he uses. *[Interruption.]* I will ignore the unkind comment that he has just made.

In many ways, this Bill is like the curate's egg: it is good in parts—indeed, it is good in many parts—and started from a place of good intentions. As the Secretary of State set out, smoking has a huge cost to society and to individuals. We know that smoking is the single biggest entirely preventable cause of ill health, death and disability in this country, and we see in our NHS the impact of smoking every day. It is responsible for around 80,000 deaths in the UK each year and is estimated to cost the NHS and social care more than £3 billion a year, including 75,000 GP appointments every month. As the Secretary of State said, almost every minute someone is admitted to hospital because of smoking. It substantially increases the risk of many major health conditions throughout people's lives, such as stroke, diabetes, heart disease, stillbirth, cancers, dementia and asthma.

As the Secretary of State has alluded to in the past, it is often people in more deprived areas who have higher smoking rates, lower healthy life expectancy and higher mortality rates linked to smoking. Some 230,000 households are estimated to live in smoking-induced poverty, and children of smokers are three times as likely to start to smoke, potentially perpetuating the cycle. Over 80% of smokers started before they turned 20—many started as children—yet more than half of current smokers want to quit; as the Secretary of State said, three quarters say that they would never have started smoking if they had the choice again. Let me be clear: reducing smoking, giving people the information and support to quit, and helping to protect children in particular are worthy ambitions.

Among all the doom and gloom, there is some positive news: smoking rates are falling anyway. While around 6 million people in the UK smoke, the number of smokers has been falling for decades. In 2023, just 10.5% of people aged 16 and over smoked, compared with 20.3% in 2010, 20.7% in 2000 and 30% a decade before that in 1990. Likewise, the number of children who smoke is falling. While this trend is welcome, it is understandable that there is a strong desire to see continued action to further drive down the prevalence of smoking

[*Edward Argar*]

and tackle the recent rise in vaping among non-smokers, especially among young people, and to protect future generations.

As was evidenced by the interventions that the Secretary of State kindly took from many hon. Members, I am sure that many of us in the House have been alarmed by the surge in youth vaping, which has doubled in the past five years. Despite it already being illegal to sell nicotine vapes to under-18s, a quarter of children tried vaping in 2023. While nicotine vapes can and do play an important part in helping adults to quit smoking, we are clear that children who do not smoke should not take up vaping. The nicotine content makes those products highly addictive, while the long-term impacts of the colours and flavours being inhaled are highly unlikely to be beneficial. Of course, the full effects may not be known for some years yet.

The uptake in youth vaping has been driven in part by the branding and promotion of products clearly aimed at children, with vapes, packaging, descriptions and marketing all designed to appeal specifically to young people. Grown adults trying to quit smoking are unlikely to see the appeal of cartoon characters on their vapes, but of course, children and young people will. Likewise, the bright colours and fruit flavours are far more likely to appeal to children than to those looking to quit tobacco smoking.

For those reasons, the last Government introduced a Bill that primarily targeted our interventions at young people. It would have restricted who could purchase tobacco products without impacting current adult smokers. It sought to tackle youth vaping by restricting flavours, introducing plain packaging and changing how vapes are displayed in shops so that they do not appeal to children. It would also have prohibited the sale of non-nicotine vapes and vaping alternatives such as nicotine pouches to under-18s, just as it is already illegal to sell nicotine vapes to children. In parallel, it would have introduced new fines for rogue retailers in order to tackle the illegal market, seeking to make sure that the law—such as age restrictions on purchasing vapes—was properly enforced.

That approach was targeted at the next generation of young people and aimed to prevent the take-up of smoking and vaping and break the cycle of nicotine addiction before it had even started. That Bill was not about demonising people who smoke or curtailing current smokers' rights or entitlements in any way. None the less, it had challenging practical implementation impacts.

I have a lot of respect for the public health Minister, the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne)—I think that is his new constituency name—and know him well. I hope that when he winds up the debate, he will address some of the points I am about to make. My first point is about the impact on shopkeepers, particularly small shopkeepers, of enforcing and operating within increased restrictions, and the extent to which those restrictions are practically enforceable. In the context of what the Bill sets out to do, how does one avoid the existence of, or an increase in, a black-market economy in vapes or cigarettes?

We introduced our Bill before the general election. Since then, the new Government have introduced a Bill that may have the same name, but is not quite the same

Bill that was introduced back in March. The Bill before us today gives the Secretary of State new, or significantly modified, powers under the Health Act 2006. It runs the risk of piling an unknown number of regulations on to retailers through a new licensing scheme, and it creates a whole new registration scheme. The challenge is that right hon. and hon. Members will not be told in detail what those schemes will look like, the specific impact they will have on businesses, or the detailed impact they will have on smoking and vaping rates until after the legislation has been passed. A hefty impact assessment—all 294 pages of it—has been produced. Given that the public health Minister has signed it, I fear he had to read every one of those pages before doing so. However, even with that impact assessment, the detailed impact of the individual regulations that may follow is unclear.

For example, clause 136 amends the Health Act 2006 to give the Secretary of State the power to extend smokefree places to some outdoor spaces. Of course, adults should be mindful and thoughtful about where they smoke or vape to be considerate to those around them, especially in areas with children or vulnerable young people, but the Bill risks giving the Secretary of State expanded powers to expand smokefree areas with minimal oversight. I acknowledge that the affirmative resolution procedure will be used, but as we in this House know, a statutory instrument and the procedures that accompany it are not as rigorous in their scrutiny as primary legislation.

Unlike previous laws, which banned smoking in confined areas such as pubs and bars, the Secretary of State is talking about bans in open spaces where the risks of second-hand smoking may be more limited. Page 64 of the delegated powers memorandum states:

“Under Section 4 of the 2006 Act, the Secretary of State could make regulations to designate additional places as smoke-free provided that they were of the opinion that there was a significant risk persons present in such a place would be exposed to significant quantities of smoke without a smoke-free designation...Section 5 of the 2006 Act gave the Secretary of State powers to make regulations for vehicles to be smoke-free.”

It goes on to say:

“Clause 136 amends the existing power in section 4 of the 2006 Act by omitting the risk condition.”

I would be grateful if the public health Minister could explain in his winding-up speech—I suspect he will be able to do so—why that condition is being removed. It was there for a reason: to give a sense of proportionality to anything that was done and to ensure that a particular bar had to be met, given the impact. Its removal effectively gives the Secretary of State much greater discretion to do as he wishes at a future date. I note that the Secretary of State has said today that he changed his mind on banning smoking in pub gardens or outside hospitality venues. I know him well, and he is an honourable man, so I take him at his word on that, but there is nothing in this proposed legislation to prevent a future Secretary of State from coming back, consulting and expanding beyond the areas where he proposes to restrict smoking to other venues and settings at a future date. Under clause 136, that could be done without the crucial risk criteria being applied. I would be grateful if the Minister could address that point, because it is hugely important. Members are being asked to decide now whether they support expanding

smokefree places to an unknown list of outdoor spaces in the future, so it genuinely raises significant challenges and concerns if that gateway is not in place.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I am listening very carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman has to say. Some 13% of adults in Bracknell smoke, but we know that more than half of smokers would like to give up, so what I and my constituents are listening for is a commitment that his party will back concrete measures to end the public health epidemic of smoking once and for all—or are they just going to wrap up their objections in sophistry?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for most of what he just said. I will address precisely his point in a few paragraphs, but I say to him that my party brought forward legislation in March, which was debated in April, that did not have the mission-creep that I fear the Secretary of State is demonstrating with clause 136 and various other measures in this proposed legislation.

I must also challenge the Government on how they anticipate this measure being enforced. Will members of the public be encouraged to call the police if they see a parent smoking in a prohibited place? If there are no children in a park or playground, will it still be prohibited?

Concerns are also raised by the new licensing and registration schemes. While it is right that we had planned to expand the existing notification scheme to include non-nicotine vapes and nicotine products involved in the supply chain, this Bill goes a number of steps further. The Secretary of State will be able to create a new licensing regime for retailers for tobacco, vaping and nicotine products. Over 70% of convenience stores selling vapes and tobacco products are independent shops. How will they fare and how will they be assisted with the layers of added bureaucracy and cost that will be associated with the Bill? Do local authorities, which are already under pressure, have the capacity and additional funding allocated to administer such a licensing scheme in their areas?

Again, my fear is that we are unable to make a fully informed decision about the impact because the regulations will be set out only after the Bill has passed. The impact assessment states:

“A more restrictive licensing scheme would be expected to have a greater impact on public health and a greater economic impact on businesses.”

However, we simply do not know if that is what the Secretary of State has in mind or what the regulations will look like. Likewise, there is no detail on the impacts of a new registration scheme for all tobacco, vaping, nicotine and herbal products, as well as tobacco-related devices.

In the few months that the Government have been in office, they have sadly shown that they are not particularly a friend of business and have broken a number of their pre-election promises. Although I have confidence in the Secretary of State as an individual and as a right hon. Member of this House, I ask him to forgive the cynicism of those on the Opposition Benches over any attempted reassurances from the Government that they will take businesses' concerns into account as they consult on their plans.

To the point made by the hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), if a Division is called, in line with the precedent set last time this will be a free vote; each Conservative Member may vote as they choose. The Bill, as I have said, comes from a good intention to keep the population healthy, to ease costs for the NHS and to prevent children from taking up addictive habits that may follow them for the rest of their lives. I support those objectives, but I call on the Minister for public health, when he winds up, to give the reassurances I seek and roll back the additional measures that have been put in place, over and above what we were proposing.

It is important that information is available so that people can make informed decisions and that support is available for those who choose to stop smoking. Adult individuals are best placed to make decisions about their own lives, but we recognise that the same is not true for children. I look forward to the responses from the Minister for public health, which I hope will be constructive. I welcome the Secretary of State's offer to be collaborative and constructive in his approach to the legislation.

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): Will the shadow Secretary of State give way?

Edward Argar: I will briefly, because I have one sentence to go.

Dr Cooper: I thank the shadow Secretary of State. As a public health doctor, I am delighted to hear him speak so freely, openly and positively about all the great things that this legislation will bring, but I remain unclear whether he will be voting in support of this generation-defining public health Bill this evening.

Edward Argar: That will depend on whether the Minister for public health gives the promises I seek that he will withdraw a number of the measures that the Government have added to the Bill. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who will take the Bill through Committee on behalf of the Opposition, and I know that she looks forward to constructive and collaborative engagement with the Minister. I hope he can offer reassurances when he gets up to the Dispatch Box in a few hours' time.

4.2 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I declare an interest as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. Just over a year ago, I welcomed the previous Government's Tobacco and Vapes Bill. As the House may know, I have called for a smokefree generation for many years. I was not best pleased when the Conservatives voted down my amendments to the Health and Social Care Bill in 2021. Those amendments called for a ban on flavours and packaging targeted at children, which the shadow Secretary of State has just brought to the House's attention. If they had not been voted down, we would already have regulations to protect children from smoking and vaping.

I join the Secretary of State in congratulating the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) on bringing the Smoking and Vapes Bill forward, but it was regrettable that the previous Government did not fast-track it in the wash-up before the general election. Nevertheless,

[*Mary Kelly Foy*]

I am grateful to the Labour Government for bringing this Bill forward. It is stronger than the previous legislation, and it responds to many of the issues that I and others raised in Committee with the previous Bill.

The comprehensive regulation of all vaping and nicotine products is important for addressing the concerns that vaping has become too widespread among young people. I strongly support regulations to reduce the appeal of such products, but we must ensure that the regulations are enforceable, robust and fit for purpose. My first of many questions to the Minister is this: will he confirm that a detailed policy paper will be forthcoming, setting out the policy objectives on vaping and how the new regulations will deliver against the objectives?

The Labour manifesto made a bold commitment on halving the gap in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest regions in England. Tobacco control is the best way to close the gap. We cannot say it enough: the range of diseases that smoking causes is extraordinary, from stillbirths and asthma in children to heart disease, stroke, dementia in old age, poor mental health and many cancers.

It will never cease to amaze me that there are people in this place who are happy to be lobbied by the tobacco companies—including, I am guessing, the shadow Secretary of State—some of whom we have heard from already, knowing full well the damage caused to individuals, families and communities, as well as to our health services. That includes communities such as mine in the north-east of England, where smoking is still the key driver of health inequalities and has been the cause of 26% of all deaths in the last 50 years and the cause of 125,000 deaths since 2020.

In my constituency of City of Durham, smoking costs us over £95 million a year, and more than £3 million is spent on healthcare. In County Durham, smoking costs us over £500 million a year, and over £21 million is spent on healthcare. In the north-east, the cost is over £2 billion, with healthcare costs at over £93 million. Nationally, smoking is still the greatest cause of preventable death, still the leading cause of premature death and disability, and still responsible for half the difference in healthy life expectancy between the rich and poor. That is why I have asked time and again in this Chamber for action.

It is a tragedy when we consider the further health implications. According to Cancer Research UK, the most deprived communities will not be smokefree until 2050. I urge the Government to restate their intention to publish a road map to a smokefree country and outline how support will be targeted at those who most need to quit. Smoking is also directly and indirectly linked to poor mental health. Nearly 40% of those who have a severe mental health problem smoke, and smoking accounts for two thirds of the reduction in life expectancy among that group.

I want to touch on the “polluter pays” levy. The Darzi review found that our health service is in real trouble. The Secretary of State is right that to rebalance supply and demand in our healthcare system, we need a major shift from sickness to prevention. The Khan review and the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health have advocated for a “polluter pays” levy, which could raise £700 million a year to create a smokefree

fund. That would ensure that the tobacco companies—not the public—pay for the harm that they inflict. Will the Minister consider that approach to fund the work needed to reduce smoking across society and to protect the NHS?

I should add that public health initiatives to tackle smoking are remarkably good value for money and that failing to fund efforts to tackle smoking is a false economy. Initiatives such as Fresh—the north-east’s tobacco control programme—have led the way in tackling smoking in our region. Fresh and others could provide best practice for the Department.

The Minister will know that the UK Government are party to the World Health Organisation framework convention on tobacco control. Article 5.3 seeks to protect policymaking from industry influence, but we have already seen that influence even at this stage of the Bill. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will live up to their obligations under the FCTC and commit to protecting the Bill from industry influence throughout its parliamentary process and the following regulations?

I am proud to vote for a Bill that will improve people’s lives and extinguish the injustice that smoking causes to individuals and society. Smoking is never about choice, and it is pathetic that some Members have argued that this is an issue of freedom; it is absolutely nothing of the sort. Tobacco companies target children and young people. Smoking is an addiction, and the only free choice is that first cigarette. When someone is in hospital, struggling to breathe because of smoking-induced lung cancer, where is their freedom? Today, we have the opportunity to give people the freedom to live healthy lives, free from disease and the inequalities that smoking causes.

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

4.9 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I can confirm that it has been a very long time since anyone has asked me for ID to make a purchase—a moment that is even further into the past than the last time I bought a packet of cigarettes. That experience will inform some of my comments today. I support this legislation, but it will be a free vote for my Liberal Democrat colleagues, and I will use my speech to explain why.

First of all, the Bill is split into two sets of measures: one to deal with smoking and one to deal with vaping. We are 100% supportive of the set of measures dealing with vaping, which is in line with our party policy that was passed at our 2023 conference. I think everyone in this House is united in agreeing that the targeting of nicotine products at young people and children through bright colours and attractive flavours is a shameful practice. Measures need to be taken to prevent that.

I am the mum of a teenager—lucky me—and he reports that some of his friends are unable to concentrate through a 40-minute lesson, because they have been exposed to such high levels of nicotine in the vaping products that they use that they are even more addicted to nicotine than someone who might have taken up smoking many years ago when I was young. We welcome the changes to prevent the targeting of vaping at children, and the recent ban on disposable vapes. We also

acknowledge that vaping is an important part of smoking cessation, and legal vaping needs to continue into the future.

The introduction of a phased smoking ban is problematic, and not because Liberal Democrats want to see people smoke themselves into an early grave—far from it—but because it raises issues of practicality and civil liberties, which I will run through on behalf of my colleagues. The first question is, practically, how will this work? My son was born in January 2009. He will be one of the first people to benefit from a smokefree generation, and I sincerely hope that he never takes up smoking, but if his friends who are just a few weeks older choose to take up smoking, they will be able to continue to do that for the rest of their lives. Under this Bill, those future adults will be able to buy tobacco products for themselves but it will be illegal for them to pass them on to others a few weeks younger, such as my son. Problematic enforcement causes some concern and leads us to question why there was not an alternative way, perhaps by setting a very high minimum age to buy cigarettes, so that most people get through the flourish of rebellious youth and do not take up smoking in the first place. The concerns about practicality are legitimate.

The Bill also raises the spectre of an ID card, because those people who choose to start smoking will potentially be forced to carry an ID card or some other form of ID with them for the rest of their lives. That is a concern for the Liberal Democrats, who are strongly opposed to requiring people to carry ID around with them, for various issues of privacy and personal liberty. There is also an ideological point about discriminating between two people because of their age. We are generally opposed to that as a society, but the Bill does that.

The concerns about retailers suffering abuse are also legitimate. They are already suffering from a wave of shoplifting and antisocial behaviour. Some of the abuse directed at them comes from the enforcement of age legislation for things such as alcohol and existing tobacco legislation. We need to be cognisant of the decimation of community policing under the previous Government. We need to be sure that those retailers are fully protected. The Bill creates an extra risk for them.

Finally on the risks, there is a concern for the licensing authorities, which presumably will be local councils, although we do not have the detail on that yet. Lots of local councils are unable to carry out much more than their statutory duties currently, so I would appreciate confirmation that licensing will be fully funded for them, so that they are not put in charge of enforcing something that will be impossible.

I want to touch on what for me is quite an important area: the creation of a black market. Criminal gangs exploit young people in North Shropshire by getting them hooked on cannabis. It is an extremely difficult problem. Young people get into debt to those criminal gangs and are hooked into criminality for life. They see things people should never see and are extremely damaged by that exploitation. I share the concern that progressively banning tobacco products will increase the scope for the black market and the risk to children.

For all those reasons, as some Members may be aware, I abstained on the vote last time the legislation was brought through the House. It would be a legitimate question to ask me why I have changed my mind. I met somebody called Linda Chambers, a Liberal Democrat

councillor in Hull, who came along to an event organised by Action on Smoking and Health to encourage Members to support the Bill. Linda was devastated when she lost her husband of 50 years to cardiovascular disease. As with a number of other speakers at the event who also spoke very powerfully about their experiences, her loved one had tried on several occasions to give up smoking but had been unsuccessful. The speakers at the event explained that the nicotine addiction had taken away the personal choice of their loved ones to live the lives they wanted to live. They were not exercising their personal choice any more. For a liberal, that is a very powerful argument. Personal choice is so important, and addiction really does take that away.

As the asthmatic daughter of two smokers who have repeatedly tried and struggled to give up over the years, Members might perhaps have expected me to understand that argument a little bit earlier. Typically, as the daughter of two smokers, I took up smoking myself. I did not smoke very much and did not smoke for very long, but I still occasionally have the odd craving for reasons I cannot explain, especially when I am in a traffic jam. But it is not funny, is it? Tobacco is uniquely harmful and uniquely addictive, and that is why I support the measures we are taking to address that.

Another really important, persuasive and powerful argument I heard in the previous Parliament was when Dame Andrea Leadsom, the responsible Minister at the time, and Chris Whitty took the time to provide a briefing to the Liberal Democrats. One point they highlighted was health inequality. A point that struck me—at the time, I was the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss—was that 21.1% of pregnant women in the most deprived areas of the country are likely to smoke while pregnant, whereas in the least deprived parts of the country only 5.6% are likely to be a smoker. That huge difference correlates to a horrifying differential in the rate of stillbirth. Women who smoke while pregnant are more likely to have a stillbirth, and stillbirth rates in the most deprived areas of the country are 50% higher than in the least deprived areas. If we are serious about tackling health inequality rather than just paying it lip service, we have to take additional measures to tackle those inequalities.

For all the reasons I have outlined, I will support the Bill. However, I retain a few concerns, and I would be grateful if the Minister could address them in his wind up. The powers in the Bill effectively allow the Secretary of State to make any public place or workplace a no-smoking area. That is very far reaching. I would prefer to introduce measures in Committee that would require him to come back to Parliament before extending the areas affected. That would protect the hospitality industry, which, as hon. Members have pointed out, is struggling, particularly in rural areas. I will also point out the obvious, which is that anybody who is currently over 16 could potentially be a smoker for life.

There are many, many people who took up smoking and who want to give up but are unable to. We must reverse the cuts to the public health budget and the smoking cessation budget to enable those people to benefit from stopping smoking. The Conservatives have slashed the public health budget since 2015. We would like the Secretary of State to use the money provided for health in the Budget to address that problem. A quarter of cancer deaths are caused by smoking and 75,000 GP

[Helen Morgan]

appointments every month are for smoking-related illness. Many women who smoke during pregnancy will continue to smoke for up to another decade.

Despite my concerns, I will support the Bill to ensure that people like Linda do not have to lose their loved ones to an addiction they were unable to end. I urge the Secretary of State to look at measures to deal with the practical considerations we have outlined and to support the current generation of smokers to quit if they want to.

4.19 pm

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I apologise for the fact that I may not be able to stay in the Chamber for the winding-up speeches, owing to a long-standing appointment this evening.

Although smoking is the No. 1 preventable cause of death and ill health, there are still more than 6 million smokers in the country. While the Government are right to press on with the Bill in the current Parliament, I hope that it can be improved even more compared with the version presented by the last Government. It will help the country to become smokefree by 2030.

As Members may know, I am a strong advocate of vaping, and I will concentrate on that in my speech. I have witnessed many of my friends and family members make the switch from smoking to vaping, and it is my honour to chair the responsible vaping all-party parliamentary group. Vaping is 95% safer than smoking, according to both King's College hospital and the former Public Health England, and it is the most successful tool to help smokers to quit. According to data from ASH, 3 million adult vapers are ex-smokers. I fully support the health message that those who smoke should change to vaping, but "if you don't smoke, don't vape". However, we now need urgent Government action to prevent youth vaping, which has become far too prevalent in recent years. We have already heard the statistics this afternoon.

In campaigning on vaping, I have been privileged to work with the vaping industry. I was disappointed that during the passage of the earlier Bill the last Government did not engage with the industry to find the best solutions to tackle both youth vaping and the illicit trade, which is largely responsible for children and young people having access to the vape market. At a forum held recently by the UK Vaping Industry Association, its director general, John Dunne, praised our Front-Bench team for the way in which they had already engaged with the industry, whose proposals will, I know, help the Bill achieve its objectives.

Like the industry, I have always supported the introduction of a licensing scheme as a helpful tool for better enforcement of the market, helping trading standards to identify non-compliant businesses, impose tough penalties and close down premises. I do not understand why restricting the number of shops and supermarkets selling vapes increases regulatory compliance. Shops and supermarkets that sell vapes responsibly should not be penalised, and we need to ensure that specialist vaping retailers can continue to operate, especially as they provide a such a critical service in helping smokers to quit. Flavour names that appeal to those under 18 are unacceptable and must be banned, but flavours are a

key factor in helping smokers to make the transition to vaping. Research shows that about 65% of adult vapers find fruit-flavoured or sweet liquids preferable. If only tobacco flavours are available, many ex-smokers will return to smoking.

According to the Government's own impact assessment, restricting vape flavours could affect 87% of adults who vape. Hopefully, meaningful consultation on flavours will lead to a safe solution to curtail youth vaping while also ensuring that vaping is an attractive alternative for adult smokers. It may well be that increasing fixed penalty notice fines to £200 is not a strong enough deterrent to irresponsible retailers and pales into insignificance compared with the profits made from the sale of cheap vapes on the illicit market, and I hope that the Bill can be amended to increase the fine significantly so that it acts as a real deterrent to those who now happily sell vapes to children.

Keeping in mind the UK's 6 million smokers, who need help to quit, it is important to ensure that as we bring in the strongest possible measures to prevent under-age access to vaping products, the Bill must not over-regulate and, in doing so, undermine the power of vapes as a smoking cessation tool. I have been pleased to learn recently of new technical solutions that could help the Government to end youth vaping. Current laws require age verification at the point of sale, which has fundamentally failed to stop young people getting hold of vapes. The Government could go further and require continuous age verification at the point of use.

I recently met representatives of a company that has developed open-standard technology that can be applied by all manufacturers. It meets regulatory requirements for security and privacy, and can lock or unlock a device at the point of use. Vapes on sale in the UK market could be required to have secure Bluetooth technology installed—a low-cost chip that can be integrated into vaping products. Such chips provide a simple on/off switch that can be controlled via a mobile app. Users would have to verify their age via the app, in the same way as when accessing other services. This simple and straightforward approach would mean that no matter how a child got hold of a vape, they would be unable to use it. As the process would be quick and user-friendly, it would not prevent adult vapers from using vaping products as they do currently. I hope the Minister will consider looking at this technology in more detail as the Bill progresses.

The Minister knows that I am not a lobbyist for the vaping industry—some people may think that I am, but I can categorically say that it is not true. I do not even vape myself, but I do want the Bill to be effective. I genuinely believe that including the vaping industry as a consultee is essential to ensure that this Bill helps meet the Government's aim of creating the first smokefree generation, and I hope that the Minister can confirm today that the industry will be consulted during the progression of the Bill.

4.26 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome this Bill, and I think the country should welcome it and salute the Government for effectively taking on the Bill—they have polished and finessed some elements—that was introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) under the previous

Government. The gracious remarks of the Secretary of State in his opening speech will have resonated on the Conservative Benches and been appreciated.

A lot has happened in our country's relationship with tobacco. I am pretty certain that had we known in the past what we know now about the harms of tobacco for so many thousands of our citizens, both societally and in terms of health, Queen Elizabeth would have probably said to the merchant adventurers, "Thank you very much for bringing it over, but please take it back." It would not have taken root, but it has done. We have moved through a time when medics were paid by the industry to tell us of the beneficial effects of tobacco—for example, the idea that menthol was good for clearing people's lungs. As we know, the medical profession has very much changed its tune. Rather like the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), my late father-in-law was an ENT surgeon, and I well remember talking to him about the devastating impacts that he saw on people's health and the cost that such terrible and avoidable conditions can have, both to the economy and to the health service.

As I mentioned to the Secretary of State, I am no longer asked for proof of ID when I go into shops to buy anything. However, I can well remember that as a young schoolboy—this just goes to show how this country's relationship with tobacco has changed—the headmaster at my local primary school seemed to be addicted to Piccadilly cigarettes. I do not know whether they are still made, but it was my job every morning—I obviously had a trustworthy face—to trot up Wyndham Crescent, go round the corner into Severn Road, go into Tony's, the newsagent, and pick up either 20 or 40. I knew it was going to be a bad day if my headmaster needed two packets of 20. It is amazing that a nine-year-old schoolboy could be given cigarettes, but so trusting was Tony, the newsagent, that we did not have to pay. We did that on Fridays, and there was always 10p left over, which would allow me to have a comic, two packets of crisps or a bag of Chewits. When I say this to my children, who are either in or approaching their teenage years, they look at me with glee but also as though I am talking about a different age, which of course I am. What on earth can we buy for 10p these days?

As I said in my intervention on the Secretary of State, I welcome the Bill. I was grateful to him and to the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne), for a brief conversation we had today about the Government's intention not to include within the scope of this Bill—or, indeed, in any future consultation—a prohibition on smoking outside a hospitality venue. I entirely take the Secretary of State's point that it is not just the rural hospitality sector that would be affected, but a number of publicans in my constituency have said to me that it really would be the death knell for their business if smokers were not allowed to have a cigarette and a pint outside the pub, in the designated smoking area. Their businesses are very marginal, as the Minister knows and as the Secretary of State recognises, so I am grateful to them for that.

The licences that the Bill envisages will be useful for providing a record of who is doing what, where, for the benefit of officialdom in its many guises, but I urge the Government—and local government, if this gets passported down to it—not to see those licences as a cash cow.

They should not be a profit centre, and the requirements to secure a licence should not be onerous. The constraints of the Bill are clear. Hon. Members have asked why, if smoking is so bad, we do not just stop sales completely. The Government are not going down that route, so those who are going about a legal business should not be made to feel like criminals or societal pariahs for selling what is still a legal product to those who are legally entitled to purchase it.

I disagree almost fundamentally with the assessment of vaping from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon). I have three kids at our local high school, and too many of their cohort have got entrapped into vaping, brought in by the colours, the flavours, the smells, the packaging and the novelty factor. I understand entirely the intention for vaping to be a passport away from tobacco, but for too many, it seems to be an entry to smoking, and then moves them on to tobacco. That is entirely not what was envisaged, so I support fundamentally the robust approach that the Bill takes to the vaping sector.

I would be interested to hear the Minister's response to the concerns raised about smuggling. One can make something illegal, prohibit it or narrow access to it, but that does not necessarily, in the first instance, choke off market demand, and people will seek it. There will clearly have to be some robust empowering of His Majesty's Revenue and Customs agents and others to ensure that we do not see a burgeoning black market in tobacco products.

On the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend's point, I remember hearing a presentation from British American Tobacco, and a point that resonated with me was that there are legal vapes, the ingredients of which we know and are listed, and then there is a huge black market for vapes, principally from China, and nobody knows what the hell is in them. I think an awful lot of parents think that those vapes are just producing steam, and have no idea about their dangerous chemical composition. I think too many teachers and headteachers also thought that, and the learning curve has been steep.

James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): I have an interesting thought on the supply and demand issue, and the challenges it will pose from a control perspective. The hon. Gentleman paints a nice image of a day gone by when one of the kids could be sent down to the shop to pick up something for an adult, and I ask Members to consider what kind of world and country we want to live in. Do we want to live in a country where we could send one of the kids down to the shop to pick up something for us, or do we want to live in a country where we are forced to police each other's behaviour in parks? We should think very carefully about the Government's remit.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman takes me neatly to my closing point. If I understand him correctly, he is making an argument about civil liberties and freedoms. One does not have to be a libertarian to cherish freedom and liberty, as I hope we all do in this House. Libertarianism is the extreme form. It is the difference between liberty regulated and controlled—parametered, if one will—and liberty laissez-faire. It strikes me as rather incongruous for a libertarian to wish to become a lawmaker, because most laws are there to control, prohibit and regulate.

[Simon Hoare]

It seems masochistic: “I am a free market libertarian, yet I have decided to put myself in the shackles of lawmaking in order to restrict the liberties that I cherish.” The hon. Gentleman makes a serious point, but we have to deal with society as it is, rather than as we might like it to be. Things have changed.

The ultra-libertarian would ask why we force people to wear seatbelts, as people should be free to hurl themselves through their windscreen at speed. Why do we have speed limits? The libertarian would say that we should be absolutely free to drive at whatever speed, irrespective of the conditions. I remember, back at university, hearing an eccentric American—that can sometimes be a tautology—questioning, from the extreme wing of libertarianism, the merits or otherwise of ages of sexual consent.

I suggest that all we do, and our inspiration for doing it, is benign and kindly. Too often, it is interpreted as being paternalistic and patronising, but I like what the Secretary of State said about this approach to lawmaking being in the proud one nation tradition of the Conservative party, because Tories like order, not disorder.

Andrew Rosindell *rose—*

Simon Hoare: Here is a man who adores order nearly as much as he adores Margaret Thatcher.

Andrew Rosindell: One of my reasons for getting involved in politics is that I believe in a free society, and I believe that people should make choices about their own life. I do not believe that the state should govern how people live their life, but that does not mean I am an extreme libertarian. It just means that I believe in freedom with responsibility.

As my hon. Friend has said, attitudes to tobacco have evolved over the years. People have naturally decided not to smoke and, speaking as a Conservative, surely it is better to educate and let people make their own choices than to impose decisions on them.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I readily accept that it has a huge intellectual underpinning, but we have had public health campaigns for years on the dangers of smoking tobacco. In some instances, it has worked. We have also used taxation and the pricing mechanism. My late father told my mother that he would give up when cigarettes reached 10 shillings a packet. He eventually gave up when smoking was banned in public buildings and the like. The question that remains is: do we allow unfettered freedom if it harms only the individual who is exercising it, and step in when the exercise of that unfettered freedom has negative impacts on society?

The Secretary of State and others have dilated, perfectly correctly, on the impact on demand and supply in the national health service. A disproportionate amount of resource goes to dealing with smoking-related diseases, illnesses and conditions. We can do something about that. We know full well the negative impact of passive smoking on other people's health, so the impact of the exercise of that liberty is not limited to the individual. I suggest respectfully that my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) would have a stronger point if it was limited to the individual. Then we could say,

“Provide the information and let the individual take the decision.” However, that decision impacts many other people. It affects the productivity of the nation and the national health service, and the health of family and society.

I suggest to my hon. Friend that it is an entirely Conservative instinct to say, when all the levers have been pulled and buttons pushed—when there has been public information, education and some forms of prohibition—“It has worked up to a point, but not enough and not at the right speed. We will have to do something else.” I accept that not everybody who describes themselves as a Conservative, as my hon. Friend and I both do, will make the same analysis and arrive at the same position as me. I voted for the Bill in its last iteration, and I will vote for it again today, because I think it is the next lever that we need to pull and the next button that we have to push.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we have an NHS and a Government who are expected to provide and pay for treatment when people are ill, so there is a duty and an onus on the Government to try to keep people healthy, and to provide information about well-known dangers to people's health? This is not about having a nanny state, but about nudging people to make the right choices, because it costs money to treat people, and we want to save money as well.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. One can nudge, prod, push and exhort as much as one can, but the Bill is probably the final stepping stone in quite a long line of stepping stones to try to wean people off their dependency on tobacco.

The House has been generous with its time, as have you with your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker. In closing, I echo and endorse the point made by the Secretary of State and other contributors from the Government Benches: people who have an addiction are not free. They are trapped by their addiction, and that affects many areas of their life. If someone is terribly well off, they can afford the addiction to tobacco, and it will make not a jot or tittle of difference to the household budget or income, or to their standard of life—

Andrew Rosindell: On that point, will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Hoare: I will not, I am afraid, because I want to conclude. The disproportionate hammer blow is felt by families who would describe themselves as poor, on low or fixed incomes. When the choice between feeding the addiction and feeding the children comes into play, then feeding the addiction seems to have the trump hand. The Government are right to have picked up the ball and taken the Bill forward. It is an entirely Conservative measure. This is not a restriction of liberty in the abstract. The Bill is about public health. It is about taking the data, extrapolating the facts and recognising the harms, and, as responsible legislators, responding to that to make a difference to all our communities up and down the country.

4.44 pm

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): Like previous speakers, I have not been challenged on my age, even though I use moisturiser; perhaps it is my

receding hairline. I thank the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) for his eloquent speech about the Conservative party's one nation tradition and his support for the Bill. It is absolutely the case that this legislation comes on the back of decades of other Bills and Acts that have acknowledged the challenges around smoking in our society. He eloquently articulates that evolution in our body politic.

I celebrate the fact that the Bill follows other landmark Acts of Parliament under the previous Labour Government, one of which had an impact on me when I worked in the retail industry. The ban on smoking in workplaces made a fundamental change to many people's lives and overnight improved the life chances of many millions of our citizens. As has been said by Members across the Chamber, there is a consensus that smoking remains one of the leading causes of death, claiming 80,000 lives annually and costing the NHS billions of pounds, with some estimates putting it at between £3 billion and £5 billion.

Andrew Rosindell: On that basis, would the hon. Gentleman also ban alcohol? Would he ban all types of unhealthy foods, or chocolate—where does it end?

Tristan Osborne: We have age restrictions on alcohol sales and the Bill proposes doing the same. Similarly, for other substances in society, we look in a proportionate way at their health consequences; for instance, we class particular categories of drugs as A, B and C. All those things need to be taken as individual elements. Certainly, we will look at other proposals, but on this particular element, smoking and tobacco have been widely acknowledged as a public concern over many decades.

The vaping industry has seen some positive outcomes, with people transferring from cigarettes to vaping, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) pointed out. Indeed, that use for those products has been acknowledged by the NHS. As a former teacher, however, I have also seen the consequences for young people and that has been acknowledged by many parents in the Chamber. I have unfortunately seen in the classroom, through confiscation and the illicit behaviours of some young people, that blue razz lemonade, watermelon bubble gum and strawberry raspberry cherry ice are all flavours of vapes. They are being marketed at young people, whether directly or indirectly, because we know, as does the tobacco industry, that young people are where the use of tobacco-based products starts.

I have seen at first hand the consequences of the proliferation of vaping in schools and its ubiquitous presence across my area in Chatham and Aylesford. I agree that the Bill's removal of disposable, single-use vapes, which are currently so easily accessible and cynically marketed, is a sensible move and should reverse the recent trend of young people who have never smoked turning to vapes as an initial access point. It should also stop vapes being seen as a gateway to other types of drugs. Sadly, I have to report that cannabis-based products and other illicit products are gaining ground among disposable vape products.

At the same time, millions of single-use electrical devices blight our local landscapes. Many disposable vapes are deposited on roadsides and in parks, and

while it is not specifically part of the content of the Bill, the reality is that vapes have environmental consequences.

The branding of some flavours has been a key driver of youth take-up. To prevent under-age appeal, flavours should be adult-focused and restricted to such flavours as tobacco, menthol and a handful of responsibly branded fruit flavours. I note that some in the industry are already promoting that agenda.

The age restrictions are sensible, and I think that the rising age escalator will be enforceable. Indeed, many supermarkets already have an age limit well above that which is legally required and challenge at the point of disposal.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the upper-age escalator could prove difficult later on, particularly in respect of the ability of those who sell tobacco? At the moment, if a young person sells alcohol, they have to get a supervisor who is older to allow it. When the people selling alcohol are in their thirties, but were born after 2009, and everyone else in the shop is in their thirties, who will be allowed to sell the tobacco? Does he have any thoughts on that?

Tristan Osborne: The licensing regime will be looked at in detail, but the reality is that, when I am buying alcohol in a supermarket, I might be challenged on my age by someone at the counter who is over the age of 16. I think I am correct in saying that I would then have to prove my age at point of sale. I am happy to be corrected if I am wrong on that.

Enforcement is very welcome. As a former council portfolio holder for licensing, it was always very difficult to respond to emails from residents seeking redress around the sale of vaping products. Some products were being sold over the counter in unlicensed premises, so enforcement was very difficult. Other products were being marketed using very aggressive advertising. I welcome the licensing element of the Bill and look forward to hearing more details. Councils, I believe, are ready to take on the mantle of licensing. They license many other types of premises, and I suspect that this latest measure will just be an addition to the existing regime. The measure will challenge bad faith actors and illicit products. I have been asking questions about a digital tax on vaping products to see whether we can treat this sector in a similar way to other tobacco-based products.

I welcome the Bill because it will put us back on the front foot as a world leader in tobacco harm reduction, and help us lead the way in improving standards in cigarette alternatives. If we get this right, which I believe we will with this Bill, we can maintain a healthy balance, with vape usage targeted at the adult market and used as a means to reduce addiction to other nicotine-based products. The Bill balances the liberty of individuals to make choices with the responsibility of the state to uphold the public health of the most vulnerable and our young people, and I urge colleagues to support it.

4.51 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): May I declare my interest as a former chair, for nine years, of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health? In this new Parliament, I co-chair the same group with the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy).

[*Bob Blackman*]

I am passionate about preventing young people from starting to smoke and encouraging people who do smoke to give up because of my personal experience. The Secretary of State related his personal experience, and I think it is right that I should relate mine. Both of my parents died from smoking-related cancer. My late mother was only 47 when she died. She was a very heavy smoker all her life. I was then left as a 23-year-old with three younger sisters to bring up as a family. I do not want any family in this country to go through what our family went through. So this, for me, is personal as well as political.

I listened to the Secretary of State when he talked about the speech that the former Prime Minister made at the Conservative party conference. If he examines the Westminster Hall speech that I made some two months earlier, he will see that it was almost the same—word for word. I have not called my right hon. Friend out for his plagiarism before.

This House has a very long history of tobacco control. Those measures have been introduced mainly from the Back Benches. I know that the Government will proclaim that a Labour Government brought in the ban on smoking indoors, but it should be remembered that it was a senior Labour Back Bencher—a former Member of this House—who said that unless the Government introduced the measure, he would table a cross-party amendment to the Health Bill and it would be carried by a heavy majority. He did not need to do that, and I welcomed the provision.

I am delighted that this Bill builds on the Bill that was presented in the previous Parliament. I was proud to speak in that debate and to sit on the Bill Committee as we tried to improve the Bill. The then Minister, Andrea Leadsom, took away many of our amendments and said that she did not yet have the authority to agree them, but was willing to review them in the round. Clearly, we did not get to the point of doing that. It is important to remember that from 2011 to 2023, the number of people smoking dropped from 20% of the population to 11.9%, which is a big fall. The previous Government should be commended for that. Indeed, the last Government made it illegal in 2012 to display tobacco products at the point of sale. I remember that I led a debate in Westminster Hall in September 2013 calling for the standardisation of tobacco products to be made mandatory. Both the Conservative and Labour Front Benches opposed the position. Two years later, it was passed by this House. That shows how the Back Benches lead and Governments often follow.

At the same time, children were protected from harmful second-hand smoke by a law that made it illegal to smoke in a vehicle containing anyone under 18. That is difficult to enforce, and I remember many colleagues saying, “If you can’t enforce it, it won’t happen,” but most colleagues will remember sitting in a car where their parents were smoking and suffering that second-hand smoke. We won that argument. It was once again a Back Bencher—the senior Back Bencher Alex Cunningham—who brought that forward, and we were proud to support it.

We won the argument on the smokefree generation. The then Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), built the cross-party consensus then, and we reached the

consensus on raising the age of sale for tobacco by one year every year. In the vote on Second Reading of the last Tobacco and Vapes Bill, it was rightly backed by a huge majority across the House.

I welcome the new measures, which include the amendments tabled to the original Bill. It takes into account most, if not all, the amendments we proposed last time in Committee. The Government have not yet met the standards set by the last Government, though, in addressing smoking among the 5.6 million smokers in England. The last Government committed £15 million in funding for mass media campaigns, £30 million for enforcement and £70 million for local stop smoking services. I note that the Secretary of State mentioned the £70 million for smoking cessation services, but not the other items. When the Minister responds, will he commit to the same level of support for the “swap to stop” scheme to support adult smokers to switch to vapes and a national financial incentive programme, particularly aimed at pregnant women who want to stop smoking?

Today, the Government confirmed funding for stop smoking services and enforcement. That is welcome, but only if the funding is sustained for the next five years in line with the commitments made by the previous Government. I am also concerned that while the enforcement duties in the Bill are greater than before, that has not been matched by additional funding. Will the Minister confirm that a full assessment of the cost of enforcement will be undertaken as a matter of urgency and that the funding will be reviewed following that and the passage of the Bill?

Between 2022-23 and 2023-24, we saw the biggest single drop in maternal smoking rates since records began, from 8.8% to 7.3%—an 18% decline in the number of women smoking during pregnancy. The fall was a credit to the services established under the last Government to support women to quit. Keeping up that level of progress will not be easy, but by maintaining the world-leading national financial incentive scheme, that rate of decline can be maintained, giving children the gift of a smokefree start in life. However, the funding for the scheme is due to come to an end in March next year. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government will extend the scheme and ensure that every baby gets the best possible start in life—something I know his predecessor would have strongly supported?

Most of the Bill comes from the Khan review. One item is not in the Bill that certainly should be. The difficult fiscal environment that the Government find themselves in means that discussions on funding can lead to tense shoulders on the Government Benches. However, I bring good news: there is a way to raise revenue, by passing the costs directly on to tobacco companies—those responsible for the blight on our population’s health and wealth. Will the Minister agree to come to the APPG and address the matter, so that we can talk about the implementation of a “polluter pays” tobacco levy on the profits of big tobacco, which would address issues with market prices and limit the profitability of the industry? That can all be done without impacting the cost of tobacco to the consumer or, indeed, on the wholesale market.

As co-chair of the all-party group, I congratulate the Government on adopting so many of the amendments that we tabled in the last Parliament, including on the

introduction of a licensing scheme. I am pleased that the Bill indicates that that scheme will be more robust than the current scheme for alcohol, meaning that it can be used to improve public health, which I am sure we all agree with. At the Committee stage of the previous Bill, I also tabled an amendment to require age verification for everyone who purchases tobacco. That would aid enforcement and simplify the process for shop workers, who would not have to guess whether customers were over the legal age of sale or explain to some why they were being asked for proof of age. The requirement to ask for proof of age has been strengthened but not mandated, so in Committee will the Minister consider introducing mandatory age verification?

I welcome the ban on vape sponsorship and advertising, which was, once again, discussed in the previous Bill Committee. The promotion of vaping products for anything other than smoking cessation does not support public health goals. However, I am pleased that the Bill ensures that public health organisations can still promote vapes as a quit-smoking aid. Can the Minister confirm that the Advertising Standards Agency will work with public health organisations to ensure that that works in practice, so that smokers are still informed about the benefit of switching and, more importantly, of giving up tobacco altogether?

The Bill includes new powers to extend and designate smokefree places as vape-free. It is a shame that a consultation on where those powers should apply was curtailed before the Bill ever reached Parliament, because we need an open debate on that subject, and it would be better led by evidence rather than by decisions made behind closed doors at the Department. Will the Minister consider that aspect and see whether we can have a proper consultation so that all members of the public can participate?

The Bill consolidates many existing powers around tobacco control and brings them into one place, and I welcome that proposal. It will, I hope, ensure that legislation is future-proofed against any loopholes or escape clauses. We know how hard big tobacco works to get around the legislation we pass in this place. An issue that I do not believe is covered by the Bill—although I stand to be corrected—is that of chewing tobacco. Paan, for example, is often mixed with tobacco and sold with different products in different outlets, and it is sold loose, so it is difficult to monitor. Often, existing laws on oral tobacco are not enforced properly, so the populations who use those products, who tend to come from the Indian subcontinent, do not realise the risks that they are running. We know that mouth and throat cancers are particularly prevalent among people from the Indian subcontinent. We must combat that by ensuring that such products are properly regulated. Will the Minister consider regulating all forms of tobacco and ensuring that trading standards and others have the resources to enforce the regulations properly?

I congratulate the House on the continued consensus on reducing smoking, and take this moment to mark the significance of the Bill's return to Parliament. I am very proud that it was a Conservative Government who first introduced the policy. No other consumer product kills up to two thirds of its long-term users; it is uniquely lethal and requires a regulatory approach. Government intervention is justified against this addiction, which steals the health and wealth of our population. To those

who say that this is a matter of freedom of choice, I say that there is freedom of choice only in taking the first cigarette, after which people are addicted for life and either have to try to quit—some try up to 30 times, as we have said—or face shortened lives and horrible deaths.

We in this country have been a world leader in tobacco control, standing up to big tobacco's repeated efforts to block our progress. The creation of a smokefree generation would have been absolutely unthinkable a few years ago, but it is so close—we can see it coming now—and it will be a credit to this Parliament and the previous one. I remember the Minister saying that it would be a Labour Government who created a smokefree England by 2030. Let us hope that we can do it faster than that.

5.4 pm

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I start by welcoming this Bill, which will create the first smokefree generation. Children turning 15 this year will never legally be able to be sold tobacco.

As we look to reform and transform our NHS and improve health outcomes for our country, we cannot do so without tackling the root causes. The long-term chronic health issues that stem from smoking and the impact that they have on our NHS are well known and have been well covered today; they do not need rehearsing by me. It is worth noting that fewer young people take up smoking each year, which is good news and should be welcomed by Members. The proportion of adults aged 16 and over in the UK who said that they smoked cigarettes decreased significantly from 12.7% in 2021 to 11.2% in 2022, continuing the downwards trend seen since 1974. Recent research by Go Smoke Free shows from analysis of Office for National Statistics figures that between 2015 and 2023 the percentage of adults who smoke in Suffolk has declined to 10.6%, down from 16% in 2016.

That positive downwards trend does not mean that young people are safe from the addictions of smoking or that further interventions by this Government are not needed. Alongside the decrease in young people taking up smoking and the decline in adults in Suffolk smoking, we have seen an increase in young people and children taking up vaping. The vaping epidemic among children and young people should be a great concern to us all on both sides of this Chamber. In 2023, 20% of children had tried vaping, which was almost double the figure in 2020, before the first covid lockdown. This rapid trajectory is frightening, and I share the concerns of many parents who have written to me about the availability of vapes and the marketing of them, which so often seems as if it is targeted directly at children.

We know that disposable vapes are the products of choice for the majority of children vaping today, and I therefore welcome the ban on disposable vapes that this Bill will bring forward. The new legislation will not only protect the environment, but help to make huge strides in reducing the appeal of vapes to young people and help to keep them out of the hands of the most vulnerable children. I also welcome the Bill's drive to ban the advertising and sponsorship of vapes and nicotine products and allow regulation of the flavours, packaging and display of vapes so that they cannot be marketed to appeal to children. It is astonishing that it is currently legal for vapes to be sold from locations such as the

[*Jenny Riddell-Carpenter*]

back of taxis, toy stores and confectioners. This practice must stop, and I am glad that the Bill seeks to tackle that—in particular, it will be hugely welcome to constituents in Suffolk Coastal.

In my constituency, we have vape shops clearly targeting children and young people and advertising products along with sweets in a clear attempt to market and sell them to those aged under 18. Residents in Felixstowe have been rightly outraged by the recent opening of an American sweet and vape store right on the high street in a prime location that is so clearly targeting children. I hope that under the terms of the Bill, stores such as that will be in breach of the law. I will follow the detail closely. I am also reassured that the £200 fixed penalty notice will enable trading standards officers to act on the spot to clamp down on under-age sales.

This Bill is welcome, and it should be welcomed by Members on both sides of the House. I look forward to voting in favour of it later, and I will do so on behalf of the residents of my constituency who have expressed their direct concerns to me.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): After the next speech, I will impose a six-minute time limit.

5.9 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate about a Bill that seeks to change the way in which our society approaches smoking and vaping particularly for future generations.

I have never smoked in my life, and I would not wish my children or anyone else's to pick up the habit. Smoking is undeniably dangerous, highly addictive, and a significant burden on public health. The Government data is stark: smoking causes 80,000 deaths in England every year and costs the NHS and the economy billions.

At the same time, however, I firmly believe in individual choice. It is not the role of the state to dictate every aspect of a person's lifestyle. Like alcohol, smoking is harmful. Some Members have made the argument that the justification for banning smoking is that the practice also harms others. I ask those Members why we do not also ban the consumption of alcohol, which places a massive burden on the NHS as well as contributing to violent crime, including—with yesterday's White Ribbon Day in mind—domestic violence. Should we not also look at gambling, which is also highly addictive and destroys families all over the country? Instead, we educate people and provide support for those who wish to quit. I believe that is the balance that liberalism stands for—freedom with responsibility.

The Bill takes a much-needed step forward on vaping. We know that vaping is increasingly marketed in ways that appeal to children, from brightly coloured packaging to sweet, toy-like flavours. That is unacceptable. The Liberal Democrats have long called for tougher regulation of vapes, and I welcome the provisions to ban advertising, restrict packaging and flavours and enforce age restrictions. These are sensible measures that will protect young people without penalising adults who use vaping as a tool to quit smoking.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is probably aware of this, but there are a lot of safety issues with vapes and smoking, especially for young people. One of the issues seems to be that it is unknown just yet what effect vapes may have on adults, but even more so on children. For that reason, does the hon. Gentleman agree that further consideration must be given to the safety issues before we can let young people fully use vapes?

James MacCleary: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) has already raised the issue of spiced vapes in a debate in this House. I think there are a lot of safety concerns relating to vaping, and hopefully this Bill can start to address some of those issues. As a party, we earlier supported the Government's move to ban single-use vapes on environmental grounds. Vaping has a role in smoking cessation, but as the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, it has to be regulated to prevent harm to children.

On smoking, however, the Bill ventures into more contentious territory, in my view. The proposal to ban the sale of tobacco products to anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 is somewhat problematic. While I appreciate the ambition behind creating a smokefree generation, I worry about the long-term implications of this measure. For one, history teaches us that outright bans often lead to unintended consequences. As we have seen with other prohibitions, a black market can emerge, making it harder to regulate the quality and safety of tobacco products. Then there is the question of principle: should the state prevent grown, consenting adults from engaging in legal activities? I believe we must tread carefully when legislating against personal freedoms, even when those freedoms carry risk. A more effective approach would be to invest in public health measures, such as smoking-cessation programmes, early cancer detection and better treatment facilities.

The Bill also grants the Secretary of State sweeping powers to declare any public space smokefree. While I support protecting children in playgrounds, schools and hospitals, these powers go far beyond that, removing the requirement that a space must pose a significant risk of smoke exposure to be designated as smokefree. This raises concerns about potential overreach, which is understandably creating concern in the hospitality and night-time industry sectors. I urge the Government to clarify this issue when the Bill is in Committee.

Smoking rates in this country are already declining, particularly among young people. In 2021, just 1% of school pupils reported smoking regularly, compared with 30% in 1996. That trend is encouraging, suggesting that education and public health initiatives are working, so while I share the Government's goal of reducing smoking and vaping rates, I believe this Bill goes beyond what is necessary or proportionate. We should focus on supporting people to make better choices, not remove those choices altogether. There is much to welcome and commend in the Bill, and I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Government on bringing it forward. I hope the Government will consider refining their approach in Committee in some of the areas I have raised, balancing public health priorities with the liberal principle of individual freedom.

5.14 pm

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): It is a privilege to take part in this debate and to hear the broad consensus across the House on this excellent Bill. We have come a long way since the 2004 White Paper proposed a smoking ban in almost all public places in England and Wales. Smoking on public transport and in workplaces now feels inconceivable thanks to decades of work by campaigners and public health professionals and bold action from Government.

As a public health consultant, I pay special tribute to my public health colleagues who have worked so tirelessly in this area, from the seminal 1956 research undertaken by Sir Richard Doll and team that first established the link between smoking and lung cancer—something we take for granted today—through to the smoking cessation advisers who work daily to help people combat this destructive addiction.

Mark Twain is reported to have said:

“Giving up smoking is the easiest thing in the world...I’ve done it thousands of times.”

In my career to date I have been fortunate enough to undertake smoking cessation training and I can testify to the incredible amount of hard work and determination that both the quitter and the adviser put in to overcome the nicotine receptors that demand to be fed. This is an addiction, not a choice.

So it is better by far not to start this destructive habit in the first place. Currently, every day about 350 young adults still start smoking and about 160 people are diagnosed with cancer caused by smoking. Smoking is still the leading cause of premature death and disability in the UK, and is responsible for half the difference in healthy life expectancy between rich and poor. Other Members have talked about the appalling health inequalities in this country and how the Bill will really contribute to reducing them.

So it is right that this Bill will phase out the sale of tobacco and create a smokefree generation. Already ever fewer people smoke, and this legislation will increase the rate of decline. By increasing the age of sale by one year every year we can expect smoking rates among 14 to 30-year-olds to reach zero by 2050. As a mum of two young sons, I greatly welcome that.

I welcome, too, the increased powers to tackle vaping in the Government’s Bill. Vaping can be an effective aid for adult smokers to quit, but much tougher measures are needed to regulate products designed to appeal to young people. As ASH puts it:

“Vaping is an adult quitting aid, not a children’s toy.”

The chief medical officer further underlines this by stating:

“If you smoke, vaping is much safer; if you don’t smoke, don’t vape; marketing vapes to children is utterly unacceptable.”

This Bill will give the Government far greater control over the marketing and design of vapes and the flexibility to adjust regulations in the future if the market or evidence changes.

Robin Swann: Does the hon. Member agree that that is also why it is important that we control vending machine sales?

Dr Cooper: I wholeheartedly agree. Vending machines are often forgotten, but they are used for sales and marketing, and sometimes in ways we do not understand.

Wera Hobhouse: We should also look at online sales. A lot of young people purchase products online. May I ask the Minister what the Bill says about that?

Dr Cooper: I do not disagree. The Bill will give the Government far greater control over the marketing side of vapes and the flexibility to adjust regulations in the future. Life evolves outside this Chamber, and we need to be able to evolve with it flexibly.

Alongside the measures in this Bill, this Government have made important commitments to integrating smoking cessation into routine care and ensuring that the most disadvantaged groups are not left behind as we move towards a smokefree Britain. When I was undertaking my training in public health, a director of public health told me that our profession is where medicine meets politics—I am not sure how he would feel about me going into politics, but there we go. In this Bill, I am delighted to see the evidence and data provided by my profession working in synergy with this Government’s policy development to bring forward a Bill that will allow our young people to enjoy healthier futures and allow us all to live in a healthier environment. I thank all Members across the House for their work on this issue, and I offer my wholehearted support for the Bill.

5.18 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I rise to speak as a not yet reformed smoker, being in the pre-contemplative phase of my addiction, but I am pleased to speak today in favour of this Bill, part 2 of which specifically relates to Scotland. While this is only its Second Reading, the Bill certainly looks to be a promising piece of legislation that will benefit lives across the UK. Smoking is the leading cause of preventable deaths in both Scotland and the UK. As parliamentarians, we have a duty to safeguard future generations from the addiction of smoking and to reduce preventable deaths across the UK.

My unique contribution is this: I am concerned by what I see as the rise in the number of leading actors in television and film whose characters are featured as smokers. If I am right, I invite Members to consider that the next time they enjoy their favourite programme or film. It seems to me that it is the most subliminal form of product placement on our screens these days, and I often wonder to what extent the tobacco industry might be behind it in the form of indirect sponsorship.

Turning to the matter at hand, as Members will know, healthcare is a devolved matter for the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Government’s record on smoking controls is excellent. Scotland was the first UK nation to introduce and endorse the smoking ban. Scotland led the overhaul of the tobacco sale and display law. Scotland established the UK’s first tobacco retail register in 2011, and Scotland is in the process of implementing the deliberately ambitious goal of a tobacco-free nation by 2034.

I pay tribute to my party colleague, Kirsten Oswald, the former Member for East Renfrewshire, who dedicated a significant amount of her time and effort in this place

[Seamus Logan]

to this important issue. During the debate in the last Parliament on the previous Tobacco and Vapes Bill, Kirsten powerfully stated that

“any arguments put forward about personal choice or personal freedom make no sense at all when we are talking about children and a highly addictive substance. Smoking is not a free choice; it is an addiction.”—[*Official Report*, 16 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 208.]

With this Bill, we have the opportunity to directly address not only preventable deaths, but youth vaping. While decades of research have shown the harm that smoking does, we are only at the very beginning of our understanding of the harm that might be caused by vaping. There is emerging evidence in this area, but as yet, we simply do not know enough. However, we can act in a preventive way, and I heard what the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glendon) said about vaping being 95% safer. I am not so sure that the evidence supports that; I am more inclined to agree with what the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) said on that point.

The rise in youth vaping across the UK is concerning. Vaping products are not intended to be used by children, but we know all too well of the shocking usage of these products by children. In 2022, 3% of 11-year-olds, 10% of 13-year-olds and 25% of 15-year-olds in Scotland said that they had used an e-cigarette in the last 30 days. To that end, the SNP welcomes the range of new powers in the Bill to regulate the sale of vapes aimed at young people and to tackle youth vaping. Measures to tackle youth vaping cannot come soon enough. The SNP supports the new minimum age regime for tobacco sales, meaning that no one born in 2009 or later will ever legally purchase cigarettes. That will aid in the Scottish Government’s goal of a smokefree Scotland, as I have already alluded to.

The Bill follows lengthy work and co-operation between the UK and devolved Governments, including a UK-wide consultation on tackling smoking and vaping, and I am pleased to see that that work was productive. I note that Scottish Government requests have been added to the Bill, such as in clauses 52 and 53. The Scottish Government previously laid a legislative consent memorandum in the Scottish Parliament, and will do so again. Intergovernmental work and co-operation are vital on this island, especially on a topic as important as tackling preventable deaths. For Scotland, it is vital that the UK Secretary of State sets out as soon as possible after the passage of the Bill, and in consultation with the Scottish Government and other devolved Governments, his plans to make best use of the various UK-wide powers contained in the Bill. That is particularly important for the powers relating to the specifications and sale of vapes, which are vital in tackling youth vaping.

To conclude, I am happy to support the Bill, as are my colleagues in the SNP. I look forward to seeing further co-operation between the UK and Scottish Governments to tackle this important issue.

5.23 pm

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I am proud to be part of a Government who are creating the first smokefree generation and protecting the British public. This Bill will protect my constituents from avoidable illnesses and death, so I very much welcome it.

Like other Members who have spoken throughout the debate, I am one of those people who can only dream of being asked for ID these days. In fact, I am so old that I can remember growing up seeing huge billboards and bus stops with cigarette advertisements on them, and cigarette companies sponsoring entire sporting events. What a different time we live in now, and that is because our knowledge has progressed so much. We now know that there is no safe level of exposure to smoking or even to second-hand passive smoking. As the Secretary of State set out, we know the consequences, which are 75,000 GP appointments attributed to smoking every single month; 80,000 smoking-related deaths each year; and one person admitted to hospital every minute because of smoking. That is all at a cost to the NHS of more than £3 billion a year, adding to the pressure on it when we know it is at breaking point.

There is also the economic cost, with £18 billion of productivity squandered each year—dare I say, £18 billion up in smoke? Phasing out this harmful addiction is not just a health priority but a societal and economic necessity. The urgency is especially clear in Southampton, where we have had 527 emergency hospital admissions per 100,000 people for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a disease from which my mum died, despite never having smoked but being the child of heavy-smoking parents. Compare that rate to the average in England of 326 per 100,000—that represents a 61% higher rate in Southampton. There is clearly an urgent need for the Bill to bring change nationally and in my city. I do not want the children of Southampton Itchen to have to grow up vulnerable to the same smoking-related health issues that my generation and the generations before us did.

This excellent Bill will rewrite the culture around smoking and vaping, freeing our next generation from addiction, from school-age pressures and from harmful trends. Despite the troubling statistics, there is great work going on locally to tackle this issue. Before the election, I visited Professor Kath Woods-Townsend and her team at a research-based project called LifeLab, which is a collaboration between the University of Southampton, University Hospital Southampton and the National Institute for Health and Care Research biomedical research centre. The project is centred around improving the health education of young people through practical visits to its labs at the hospital and involving them in its research processes. One of its recent studies found that some vaping brands are designed to mimic sweets and that some children are persuaded that there is an element of healthiness to fruit-flavoured vapes.

Imagine being a company that plays on that. Imagine being a company that knows about the risks of vaping—knows that it can cause lung-scarring and asthma as well as bringing an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, exposure to chemicals and breathing in metal in the aerosol—and yet wraps its product up in bright colours and fruit flavours and deliberately markets it towards our children, knowing the addictive nature of vapes and knowing the vulnerability of children and the social pressures they face. The job of business is to contribute to the economy, to innovate and to create jobs and wealth, not to run rampant with our children’s health to make a quick buck for shareholders. Effective educational programmes such as LifeLab, working in

tandem with the Government's sensible legislation and action, will promote better understanding and reduce harm.

We have seen before what legislation can do: when smoking under 18, proxy purchasing and advertising on cigarette packaging were banned, all those vital steps drove down the smoking rate. Now, it is time to stub out this habit—forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker—once and for all.

The Labour Government are doing what is right by the youth of today by prioritising health over profit and ensuring that the next generation can grow up free from this addiction and its preventable diseases. Today, with cross-party support, I hope that we will take another ambitious step towards a future where our children's wellbeing comes first. I am proud to be part of that.

5.29 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate the Government on their very strong stance on tobacco and protecting children, but—the Minister will know what is coming—when it comes to refillable vapes, the Bill is missing the mark. Research by Professor Chris Pudney at the University of Bath discovered that one in six vapes confiscated in schools contained the synthetic drug Spice—a highly addictive and dangerous drug commonly found in prisons. It causes very dangerous health conditions, including damage to vital organs. On our streets, users are often slumped in a semi-conscious state, unable to function. In our schools, children are collapsing. Some are rushed to intensive care; others are left battling lifelong addiction. The highly addictive nature of Spice makes it a gateway to criminal activity, coercion and abuse.

I have spoken about this alarming issue on several occasions, and I have had some assurances from the Government, but so far I have not seen anything on it in the Bill. It will not do anything to stop the trend of Spice-spiked vapes in schools, because the vapes that contain Spice are almost all refillable. Refillable vapes are rechargeable and feature an empty pod that can be filled up with a liquid of choice. Banning disposable vapes will not address that problem. Many of the confiscated vapes containing Spice were made to look exactly like a normal product from a shop, and they are usually sold as containing THC—tetrahydrocannabinol—also an illegal product in this country. Children are inadvertently consuming Spice under the impression that it is cannabis.

Vapes containing THC are widespread in parts of the United States where they are legal, but importing them to the UK is costly and difficult. Spice, however, is cheap, readily available and highly addictive. Dealers exploit that by passing off Spice as cannabis, preying on young people and putting them at serious risk. This drug has the potential to condemn young people, in particular vulnerable young people, to a life of crime and addiction.

When such Bills come along, we have the opportunity to make them as strong as possible. There are other issues associated with Spice-spiked vapes, but I urge the Government to really look at what they can do to strengthen the Bill to address this serious problem. There are opportunities in the Bill, but focusing solely on disposable vapes risks backfiring; it may push demand towards refillable vapes, which are even easier to tamper with for illegal use. Have the Government really prepared for the potential unintended consequences? I hope that

they acknowledge the points that I have raised. I look forward to seeing them addressed as the Bill progresses. I support the Government on their very strong stance and on what they want to achieve, but I hope that the Bill can be strengthened.

5.32 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): This piece of legislation carries immense significance for the health of our nation, and I welcome the steps being taken to protect people from the harms of tobacco, to create a smokefree generation and to tackle youth vaping. We are all too aware that smoking remains the biggest cause of preventable illness and death in our country, with decades of evidence in support of that. One in four cancers is driven by smoking. Around 160 people every day are diagnosed with a smoking-related cancer. Smoking causes asthma, stillbirths and dementia. The evidence around second-hand smoke is overwhelming; it causes increased rates of cancer, heart disease, stroke and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—the list goes on.

Tobacco consumption is a primary driver of health inequalities right across the country. In the most deprived areas, the mortality rate ascribed to smoking is more than double that in the least deprived areas, as we have heard. This Bill is about not just health but alleviating the economic burden on our healthcare system. According to Action on Smoking and Health, smoking-related illnesses cost the NHS £1.9 billion each year in England alone. In Mid Cheshire, the cost of smoking exceeds £52 million annually, and more than £2 million in direct healthcare costs alone. By curbing tobacco use, we can alleviate some of that financial strain and redirect those resources towards more urgent health needs. Investing in prevention is far more cost-effective than treating diseases caused by tobacco.

In the time that I have, I want to focus on the regulation of vaping in the Bill. It is important to strike the right balance between reducing harm from tobacco and protecting young people. Vaping has a role to play in helping adults to quit smoking, and there are estimates that as many as an extra 70,000 people in England quit smoking by using vapes as an aid. However, youth vaping has more than doubled in the last five years, while almost six times more 11 to 17-year-olds vape now than did a decade ago. Many vaping products have very clearly been targeted at children through their packaging, flavours and marketing. While vaping is less harmful than tobacco, the vast majority of vaping liquids still contain nicotine, which is highly addictive and more impactful on children's brains when they are trying to quit. Many of the long-term health effects of inhaled ingredients such as colourings and flavourings are unknown.

It is our responsibility to safeguard the health of our communities, particularly our children, who are vulnerable to the allure of smoking and vaping. I certainly welcome the Bill's emphasis on more responsible regulation of vaping products. The power for the Secretary of State to require producers to produce studies on the ingredients of their products will be a vital tool in demonstrating the long-term effects of what is being put into vaping liquids.

The Tobacco and Vapes Bill is a crucial piece of legislation that aims to tackle a critical public health challenge. It will promote informed choices and alleviate

[Andrew Cooper]

economic burdens, and ultimately help us achieve our ambition of creating a smokefree UK. That is why I am proud to support this important Bill.

5.36 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I noticed from the opening comments that the Opposition have a free vote on the legislation, as do the Lib Dems. I assure the Minister that the Ulster Unionist party group in this House is 100% behind the Bill, which means: I am.

I sincerely hope it is second time lucky for the Bill. Prior to getting elected to this House, I was the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland in the re-established Assembly when it came back in February 2024. The Bill was then going through this House. Despite hugely challenging pressures, there was a much appreciated latitude from the public health Minister, Andrea Leadsom, who worked with the devolved Administrations to ensure that the Bill had a four-nations approach. I thank the Government for continuing that approach. As the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) described happening in Scotland, a legislative consent motion went through the Northern Ireland Assembly. More importantly, it received the full support of the four parties in the Northern Ireland Executive.

It was only right and proper that the profound public health benefits be extended to Northern Ireland. Like Scotland, Northern Ireland was included in the UK-wide consultation exercise, which closed in December 2023. There was particularly strong support for the measures from the people back home. The consultation received a proportionately higher response rate from the Northern Ireland population than the UK-wide population. While 62.5% of UK respondents were in favour of an ambitious smokefree generation proposal, the Northern Ireland figure stood at 79%. That was by far the greatest support from among the UK regions. Support was also much higher in Northern Ireland for a range of other proposals, such as restricting vape flavourings and displays.

Some of the flavours that attract children have been mentioned. There is also a move towards flavours, labels and names that appeal to older age groups. We now have “Brain Freeze” and “Killer Kustard.” The producers are moving on from young people who are already addicted to early teens, and are making sure that their addictions embed. It is important that this Bill addresses that.

While I am glad of the support that many of the measures have received across Northern Ireland, we need to remain mindful of the fact that if passed, the Bill will be a literal lifesaver for decades to come. Tobacco use is a leading cause of health inequalities in Northern Ireland. It is a tragedy, but an avoidable one, that the lung cancer incidence rate in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland is about two and a half times the rate in the least deprived areas. A recent health inequalities report from the Department of Health in Northern Ireland showed that the gap between the healthy life expectancy of women in the most deprived areas and those of women in the least deprived stood at 14.2 years—not months, but years. That differential will be dealt with by this Bill and others like it. Moreover,

smoking rates in the most deprived areas are typically almost three times higher than the rate in the least deprived. I therefore fully support any and all efforts to dissuade people, especially young people, from taking up the habit in the first place.

This Bill goes even further than the one that fell before the last general election. I will be honest and admit that at the time, I was hugely frustrated that the previous Bill was not given the time to succeed, and I feared that a once-in-a-generation chance to do something transformative might have been missed. Looking at the Bill now, however, I am pleased to see that, rather than potential being lost, it has the potential to be even more impactful, given all its enhancements. Mike Nesbitt, my successor as Minister of Health and the leader of my party, has been able to use the little extra time to consider the licensing provisions carefully. While Northern Ireland’s tobacco retailers register is a helpful enforcement tool, it has limitations, and a new licensing regime would be another significant step forward for my constituents.

I acknowledge that, like its predecessor, this Bill is complicated by our somewhat messy post-Brexit arrangements, but I take reassurance from this Government and the last Government on that, because surely they cannot both be wrong.

5.42 pm

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow such powerful contributions from Members on both sides of the House—from my hon. Friends the Members for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter), for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey), for Worthing West (Dr Beccy Cooper) and for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), and the hon. Members for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and for Bath (Wera Hobhouse)—as well as the entire Ulster Unionist party delegation in the form of the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann).

I support this landmark legislation, which is an important step towards delivering on this Government’s manifesto commitment to ensuring that the next generation can never legally buy cigarettes, and to creating the first smokefree generation. This is an overdue natural step towards tackling the scourge of smoking, which claims about 80,000 lives a year in the United Kingdom. Smoking is the No. 1 preventable cause of death, disability and ill health in our United Kingdom, and it is responsible for one in four cancer deaths, killing up to two thirds of smokers. In Wales, tobacco causes 3,100 cancer cases every year, and smoking is still the leading cause of cancer there. However, cancer does not respect borders, so the Bill will serve the health interests of our entire United Kingdom. I welcome that, and I also welcome the Welsh Government’s commitment to supporting this legislation and bringing it into force in Wales from 2025.

In fact, the Welsh Government have been well ahead of the curve on this issue. As far back as 2016, my constituency colleague Mark Drakeford presented legislation that would have banned e-cigarette use in public spaces, but it fell owing to shameless politicking on the part of Plaid Cymru—whose Members, I note, have not been present at all for this important debate. Rather than agreeing with the Welsh Government and introducing what would have been landmark public health legislation, Plaid Cymru’s Members were joined

by the Welsh Conservatives and the Members of the United Kingdom Independence party—remember them?—all of whom described it as unnecessary Government regulation. Plaid Cymru sided with the populist right in Wales to make a political point, and the people of Wales were worse off because of it.

Undeterred, in 2021 the Welsh Government launched their tobacco control action plan, which includes actions to protect children and young people from the dangers of vaping, such as tighter regulations on advertising and on the sale of e-cigarettes. That is a clear sign that the Welsh Government take this issue seriously, and it is our responsibility here in Westminster to support and complement those efforts. This Bill illustrates that this Government take seriously their commitment to create the first smokefree generation, and to protect children from becoming hooked on vaping.

Let us be clear: vaping is not harmless. In 2023, Action on Smoking and Health estimated that 20.5% of children aged 11 to 17 had tried vaping. Although vaping can be an effective way for adults to quit smoking, vaping cannot be recommended for children, as it carries a serious risk of addiction and future harm. Accordingly, rather than being a deterrent to smoking, vaping will see more children, not fewer, being exposed to nicotine if left unregulated. That is why the measures set out in the Bill to implement a total ban on vape advertising and sponsorship, and, subject to consultation, on the sale of vape flavours that overtly appeal to children, are so important. I fully support them.

This Bill is legislation that our teachers, headteachers, medical professionals and health services are all calling for. The vaping industry has been allowed to attract kids with different flavours and bright packaging. We would not allow that with any other addictive drug, and we should not allow it with vaping. In addition, the Bill does not deal with an aspect of vaping that I would be grateful for the Government to consider as the Bill continues its passage through Parliament. Currently, police officers do not have specific powers to confiscate vapes from children—a power that they do have with traditional cigarettes, pursuant to section 7(3) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933.

Having spoken to South Wales police officers and police community support officers, I know that the power of confiscation is an important tool that they use to deal with antisocial behaviour in designated areas of Cardiff, but their work is neutered if they cannot confiscate vapes. Although I recognise that if this Bill is passed, such powers will not be necessary in time—indeed, it will omit section 7(3) of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 from 2027 onwards—I ask the Government to consider whether it would be useful to retain the power of confiscation and expand it to include vapes for the period between now and 2027, so that our police officers have the same legal powers across cigarettes and vapes as a tool in their armoury to combat antisocial behaviour.

Aside from that specific point, I reiterate my support for this important piece of legislation. Not only will it align this Parliament with the progressive actions of the Welsh Government on such important health matters; it will bolster our commitment in this place to safeguarding public health. In so doing, it will save many thousands of lives from the scourge of cancer and protect children from becoming hooked on vaping.

5.47 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I will vote for this Bill. I admit that I am sceptical about the enforceability of the age escalator, but fundamentally the legislation addresses a huge problem in our society. There can be no doubt that smoking is a killer, so it is our responsibility to seek to diminish the death toll. Vaping is a totally unregulated sector, and I fear that it is a gateway to smoking for many young people. Therefore, it is right that it, too, comes within the ambit of the Bill.

The Secretary of State said this afternoon that this is a “four-nations Bill”. I welcome that, and I trust that it is right. That is the point I want to test in my contribution, and I will seek reassurance from the Minister about it. The reason I want to test it is that Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland alone, is still subject to the EU’s tobacco directive. We are subject to the EU’s tobacco directive because it is one of the 289 EU laws listed in annex 2 of the protocol—or the Windsor framework, as it is now called—that remain in force in a part of this United Kingdom. Article 24 of the tobacco directive says:

“Member States may not...prohibit or restrict the placing on the market of tobacco or related products”.

Does this Bill, by its necessary steps, restrict the placing on the market of tobacco? If it does, it will fall foul of the tobacco directive and will therefore be unenforceable in Northern Ireland, because of our ridiculous subjection to foreign laws that we do not make and cannot change.

We have an illustration of what might happen, because in 2022 Denmark sought to introduce almost identical legislation. It had to withdraw it, and in withdrawing it, the Health Minister told the Danish Parliament on 6 April 2022:

“The ministry...therefore considers that a ban on the sale of tobacco and nicotine products to people born in 2010 or later would require an amendment to the European Tobacco Products Directive”.

On that basis, they withdrew it. Earlier this year, the Irish Republic was minded to introduce legislation like this, but it did not proceed for the same reason.

If we are in a situation where a part of this United Kingdom quite absurdly cannot be governed by laws that this Parliament wishes to make, we are in a very sad situation indeed. It is my fear that, like in Denmark, the imprimatur would not be forthcoming from the tobacco directive and we could therefore have a situation where laws that we want to make and apply throughout the United Kingdom cannot be applied because of our subservience to foreign jurisdiction. If that is so, it will be an appalling situation. The House will have an opportunity to do something about this when my private Member’s Bill comes before it on 6 December, and I trust that Members will take that opportunity to liberate Northern Ireland from the bind of foreign jurisdiction and foreign law.

There are vested interests who will try to challenge the Bill’s applicability in Northern Ireland because of the tobacco directive, and I am fearful of the line that the courts might take, because we have had some examples. This House passed—for better or for worse—the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. It also passed the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024. I am not commenting on their merits; I am making it clear that when they went to the

[*Jim Allister*]

High Court in Belfast, both were declared inoperable in Northern Ireland. Why? Because of the supremacy of EU law.

If that were to happen with this Bill, it would be an absolute scandal. We would not be able to afford the people of Northern Ireland the same health protections that the Bill will afford to everyone else in the United Kingdom. And why not? Because we are subject to a foreign jurisdiction. It is the lifting of that jurisdiction that will bring us liberty to be governed as this House would wish us to be governed, and I trust that the Minister will be able to assure us that those fears are unfounded, that the Danes were wrong to withdraw their Act, and that our courts will—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. I fully understand his concern. That is why this Government need to give credit to the previous Government, who worked so hard to make this a four-nation approach. I want to give him and the House the assurance that it is the responsibility of the UK Government to ensure the compatibility of the Bill with the Windsor framework. The Government have taken into account all domestic and international obligations in bringing forward this Bill today.

Jim Allister: It gives me no assurance if the Government's commitment is to ensure compliance with the Windsor framework, because it is the Windsor framework that imposes EU law on Northern Ireland. Because the tobacco directive is one of the laws listed in annex 2 that continue to apply to Northern Ireland, it could trump this Bill. There is no point in the Government saying to this House, or to my constituents, that they will abide by the Windsor framework, because the Windsor framework binds us to EU law. It is only by setting it aside that we can have liberty.

Andrew Gwynne: I am sorry to detain the House, but I make it clear that this is a United Kingdom law. It covers all four nations of the United Kingdom, and we are assured that it complies with the requirements of the Windsor framework. This law will stand.

Jim Allister: The previous Government told this House—and Government lawyers probably said the same—that the Rwanda Act would apply to Northern Ireland and that the legacy Act was unchallengeable, yet it turned out that both fell under the supremacy of EU law. On the face of it, the tobacco directive suppresses this Bill and still has legal force in Northern Ireland. If that is how it turns out, I would like to hear a commitment from the Minister that the Government will override any suppression of this law in Northern Ireland and stand up for UK sovereignty in my part of the United Kingdom.

5.56 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak in this debate on a Bill that delivers on our manifesto commitment to finish the job started by the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) at the back end of the last Parliament. We should be proud that, once the Bill receives Royal Assent, it will be the most advanced legislation of its kind in the world.

I should declare at the outset that I was a smoker, and that experience gives me particular clarity on the need for change. I am also honoured to be vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. I will use my six minutes to say a little about why this Bill is so necessary and—I hope the Minister does not mind—to gently set out where I think it could go further.

We often hear that smoking is about choice. The only choices I made were to have my first cigarette at the age of 15 and then, almost 15 years and thousands of cigarettes later, the much more difficult choice to finally give up.

According to the wonderful Action on Smoking and Health, which has been quoted widely in this debate, the majority of smokers wish they had never started, and it takes, on average, 30 attempts to quit. This legislation will ensure that future generations in this country, including in Dartford, will not have their freedom to choose stolen by a deadly addiction.

The latest figures, before their collection was interrupted by the pandemic, show that in Kent, nearly 6,000 people died from smoking between 2017 and 2019, with 10,000 hospital admissions due to smoking during 2019 and 2020 alone. Before being elected to this place, I was, for many years, a local councillor working on public health issues, and I saw at first hand the burden that smoking places on my local community. Now that I have the great honour of representing the wonderful constituency of Dartford, I see smoking taking a similar toll.

No matter where we are in the country, we will hear the same stories of loved ones lost too soon, of people becoming addicted as children and of the most disadvantaged groups bearing the heaviest burden. We cannot, and must not, accept a situation in which more than 74,000 deaths a year are attributable to smoking. We now know, with more clarity than ever, the damage that smoking causes. Smoking can lead to at least 16 different types of cancer, and it cost England £21.8 billion in 2023, mainly in lost economic productivity.

We have a chance to change this. Modelling by the Department of Health and Social Care estimates that raising the age of sale by one year every year will prevent almost 500,000 cases of stroke, heart disease, lung cancer and other lung diseases by the end of the century. It will save tens of thousands of lives and help untold numbers of people to lead healthier and more enjoyable lives.

An issue that often comes up when discussing measures of this nature is how we make them enforceable. The legislation enjoys widespread public support, with 69% of the public in favour of the measures, according to polling undertaken by YouGov for ASH earlier this year, and even a slim majority of smokers in favour, which indicates that many smokers recognise that we do not want the next generation to grow up addicted to smoking. The measures command high levels of public support, and when such policies are done with and not to people, compliance is self-enforcing and high.

Turning to where the Bill might go a little further, I welcome the additional powers to create smokefree outdoor spaces and to designate smokefree places as vape-free. However, I admit slight disappointment that the Government seem to have ruled out hospitality premises from the scope of the regulations, rather than

setting out options via a consultation about how we might proceed. I hope the Minister will recognise that there are options other than an outright ban.

As the number of smokers in the UK continues to decline, there are discussions to be had about how we use public spaces and protect individuals from second-hand smoke, particularly children and those with health conditions. From my time in local government, I know that councils can play a vital role in improving the health of their communities. Councils across the country have used the pavement licensing system to create smokefree outdoor spaces. That has proved popular with businesses and customers, particularly families with children. I gently urge the Minister to consider whether the Bill might be amended to allow local authorities to decide which additional spaces, beyond those regulated nationally, they might like to make smokefree in the best interests of communities.

My final point, which reflects those made by other hon. Members, is about the “polluter pays” principle. We all know that public finances are under significant strain. If the funding we desperately need to create a smokefree country cannot be found in our existing budgets, I would urge Ministers to consider the imposition of a “polluter pays” levy on tobacco manufacturers.

6.2 pm

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): I was a smoker for 15 years, I have vaped for 12 years and I have three children under 12, who I hope will follow neither habit. I support the ambition to create a smokefree society. The harm to individuals is clear, as smoking causes 80,000 deaths per year, and the cost to the country is just as clear, with smoking costing the economy nearly £22 billion a year.

However, I have concerns about the ability of retailers to enforce the age escalator proposals. Will the Minister look at increasing the age at which people can buy tobacco by a year every year, rather than linking it to when a child is born? That would mean that people of the same age would have the same right, rather than two people being 37, for example, and one not being able to purchase tobacco because of exactly when they were born during the year.

My biggest concern about the Bill is the inclusion of vapes, alongside tobacco. Vaping is the fastest growing smoking-cessation method, and evidence has found that it is twice as effective as other tools used to stop smoking. I took part in the statutory instrument debate on 13 November and I support the ban on disposable vapes that that regulation enacted. The regulation will reduce the number of children vaping, the amount of dangerous fake vapes and the impact on the environment.

However, the Bill could go too far on vaping. The all-party parliamentary group on responsible vaping has provided a useful briefing. I believe the House will pass the Bill’s Second Reading later today, so I ask hon. Members to look at the briefing before we get to Committee. Part 5, clause 92 of the Bill has the ability to undo the Government’s ambition of a smokefree country, by potentially banning flavours under a future statutory instrument. A study of more than 20,000 vapers showed that those who start with flavoured vapes or move from tobacco to flavoured vapes are more likely to quit smoking.

That was my experience too. I first purchased a refillable vape in France, which came with a tobacco flavour and a cherry flavour. I went back to the gîte with my friends where we were on holiday. I knew what tobacco tasted like—I had my cigarettes in my pocket—so I tried the cherry flavour and enjoyed it so much that I never opened the tobacco-flavoured vape pot. I took the cigarettes I had in my pocket back home to England. They were on my bedside table for six months, after which I screwed the packet up and threw it away. I have not had a cigarette since.

I honestly feel that the provisions in the Bill for Ministers to be able to ban flavours for adults goes too far. For the record, I vape something called blueberry sour raspberry. It is not aimed at children—I buy it from a specialist vape shop where customers have to be over 18. I have the bottle in my pocket and it has no bright colours or fancy graphics on it. That is my preference as an adult to vape and it stops me wanting to pick up a cigarette again. If the Bill passes its Second Reading this evening, clause 92 should require that vape flavours are regulated with a balance between the impact on adults who would otherwise be smoking and the potential for youth uptake. Hon. Members should remember that disposable vapes have already been banned by the statutory instrument passed a couple of weeks ago.

Finally, before Ministers use the affirmative resolution procedure on any of the Bill’s parts or clauses, I urge them to undertake a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to vaping regulations. I will not vote against the Bill at this stage, but I hope the Government are open to practical amendments in Committee that support the ambition to have a smokefree generation without penalising those who already rely on vapes to lead a healthier lifestyle.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We have three remaining contributions from Back-Bench Members. This is fair notice for colleagues who have contributed to the debate to make their way to the Chamber for wind ups. I call Kirith Entwistle.

6.6 pm

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): I declare that I am a member of the responsible vaping APPG. This is a long overdue and important piece of legislation, and I commend my hon. and right hon. Friends on the Front Bench for bringing it before the House.

My home of Bolton is confronting a dual crisis: the devastating impact of smoking and the escalating problem of youth vaping. Smoking continues to ruin lives and places a heavy burden on our NHS, which many of my hon. Friends and hon. Members from across the House have also mentioned. In Bolton North East, the crisis is deeply personal. More than 14% of our population still smoke, which is well above the national average. Tragically, between 2017 and 2019, smoking claimed the lives of 1,147 people in our community, including beloved parents, siblings and friends, leaving behind grieving families and stolen futures. Beyond its devastating human toll, smoking imposes an immense economic burden on Bolton North East. Nearly £100 million is drained every year in lost productivity and increased demands on health and social care. We desperately need that money to rebuild services and support local families.

[*Kirith Entwistle*]

I am proud that the Bill takes critical steps to address the harms of smoking and works towards creating the first smokefree generation. Yet while smoking is a crisis we know well, there is a new and growing threat: the epidemic of child vaping. In the latest Greater Manchester: Testing and Research on Emergent and New Drugs young person survey, 76% of respondents reported using a nicotine vape in the past year. Schoolchildren are now twice as likely to encounter nicotine through vaping as through cigarettes or tobacco. Flavours such as bubble gum and rainbow candy paired with colourful, cartoon-like packaging are blatantly targeting children.

Flavourings play an undoubtedly important role in helping adults to quit smoking, but we must be honest about how too many vapes are being deliberately designed as a gateway to nicotine for children who have never smoked. I welcome the measures included in the Bill outlined by the Secretary of State earlier, and I am pleased to see our Government taking the issue seriously. As a mother, I look forward to further discussions on how we can protect our children while continuing to support adults who are using vaping as a tool to quit smoking.

What concerns me most is how easily young people can obtain vapes, many of which are illegal and unregulated. In Bolton, we now have the second highest number of vape stores per capita in the country. That is more than twice the national average. Although most stores operate within the law, this widespread availability creates opportunities for illegal vapes to enter the market—vapes that violate safety standards, contain unsafe ingredients and pose serious health risks to our children.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Does the hon. Lady share my concern that there is a real problem with vapes being used in the coercion of children for grooming purposes as well?

Kirith Entwistle: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention and, yes, I share those concerns quite deeply.

Bolton council has been doing excellent work to clamp down on illegal vapes. In September, 350 vapes were seized in raids across five locations in Bolton. Just this month, a shop received a closure order for selling illegal tobacco and vapes. I am pleased that this Bill responds to the needs of councils such as Bolton by introducing new powers for trading standards officers that will tackle the black market while protecting legitimate businesses.

The Bill is a commitment to the health and wellbeing of our communities and our future generations. It takes into account the need for the safeguarding of our children. For the families who have lost loved ones to smoking-related illnesses, for the schools that have been overwhelmed by the vaping epidemic, and for the young people being targeted by unscrupulous marketing, this Bill is for them and I commend it to the House.

6.11 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a rare thing in politics to have a moment when there is an absolute right thing to do, but consigning smoking to the history books for our children, our grandchildren and every generation that follows is one of those times.

We should be under no illusion that the decision that we take today will, at some point in the future—long after we have left this place—result in a time when nobody smokes. That will be the legacy of this decision today.

I ask the House to indulge me for a moment. Let us imagine that, at that point in the future, somebody brings forward a Bill to decriminalise smoking, and the Minister, clutching their impact assessment, tells the House that it will kill only 80,000 people a year, that it will cost our NHS £3.6 billion and that 80% of the people who take it up will be under 20. Which one of us would vote for it? Which party leader would refuse to direct their troops in such a vote? Who would argue that it is freedom of choice to smoke in those circumstances? It is nonsense. The decision we are taking today is clear and it is for the good of this country.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The hon. Member talks about choice. I agree with what he has said so far, but does he agree that, when it comes to the banning of smoking for people born after 1 January 2009, there is no removal of choice in the Bill, because they cannot smoke anyway at the moment? Therefore, there is no removal of choice from those people.

Mr Brash: The hon. Member is completely correct in what he says, and it is the proportionate way to do it. Some of the arguments that I have heard today about freedom of choice are genuinely confusing. One Member asked earlier why we do not ban sugary foods or alcohol on that basis. I say that we have to draw the line somewhere. That is an argument for the decriminalisation of everything—cocaine, heroin, you name it, let's go for it. No, we have to draw the line somewhere and, given the statistics around smoking, it is clear that this is the right line to draw.

I do not want to say a great deal more on this issue other than to reflect on the conversations that I have had with my children. We have been on a long journey when it comes to smoking in this country. I remember telling my children that they could eat a meal in a restaurant, and that those on the table next to them, in the smoking zone, would be smoking while they ate. They thought I was mad. I remember going to school on the bus and seeing the little cigarette holders in front of me because people used to be able to smoke on the bus. My children think that is madness. I can only hope that not long in the future children will look back and think that it was mad that we smoked at all.

I was asked about this Bill soon after I was elected by a friend, who is a parent. He knew it had fallen prior to the general election. He asked, "Will it be back?" and I said, "I am confident that it will be back." He said, "But will it be in time?" and I said, "In time for what?" He said, "In time for her" and pointed to his teenage daughter. I am pleased to say to Mark, Kim and their daughter Bella that we are bringing it back in time and that it will make a massive difference to the lives of people in this country.

6.15 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I would like to place on the record my support for the Bill, which the Government are right to describe as the biggest public health intervention in a generation. As someone who grew up around the NHS, with my first job being at

Bolton hospital, I have seen at first hand the huge cost of smoking and vaping in my constituency. In Bolton, smoking claims around 380 lives a year. Across the UK, that number is 80,000, and tobacco-related illnesses put tremendous pressure on the NHS, with smoking responsible for one in four cancer deaths. Indeed, every single minute someone is put in hospital because of smoking. The appointments, the scans, the treatment—it all adds up. Smoking costs the taxpayer over £3 billion each year in healthcare bills.

The tide of public opinion has turned irrevocably. Eight in 10 Greater Manchester adults support ending smoking, according to the Make Smoking History campaign. I suspect that many have had family or friends impacted by smoking-related harms. Five years ago, the previous Government announced their ambition for England to be smokefree by 2030. Despite a stark warning from the Khan review in 2022 that

“without further action, England will miss the smokefree 2030 target by at least 7 years”,

I find it regrettable that the Conservatives did not get round to these literal life-and-death reforms before it was too late to legislate before the general election.

I am delighted that just a few months in we are already delivering on our manifesto pledges. A generational ban on purchasing tobacco for anyone born after 1 January 2009, new regulations for the extension of smokefree areas to include our schools and hospitals, and new restrictions on oral tobacco products such as snus are hugely welcome in our fight against smoking-related illnesses.

The Bill is hugely important, and I will focus the remainder of my remarks on vaping in particular. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) noted, Bolton is regrettably one of the two vaping capitals of the UK, with over 20 vape shops registered per 100,000 people according to reporting in the *Bolton News*. Vaping can be a genuine aid for those seeking to wean themselves off smoking, but while it is clear that vapes, in combination with behavioural support, can support quitting, the health advice is unambiguous: children and adults who have never smoked should never vape.

What disturbs me is that vaping products are obviously marketed at children. Indeed, a number of vape stores in Horwich and Westhoughton in my constituency are not only garish eyesores but directly associate vapes with sweets and toys in their shop fronts. I have no doubt that many of my colleagues in the Chamber will be familiar with similar stores in their own constituencies. It is clear that bubble gum and candy floss flavours are not aimed at those adults genuinely trying to wean themselves off tobacco. This is not harmless; youth vaping has more than doubled in the past five years, while Bolton council has been told that children as young as 13 are unable to go an hour at school without vaping. Just last Friday, I visited St Catherine's primary school in Horwich and was shocked to hear children no older than 11 directly raise their concerns around vaping with me. St Joseph's high school in Horwich, which I had the pleasure of meeting last week here in Parliament, has had to install vape sensors, while the headmaster Tony McCabe has said he has already seen a rise in young people acquiring vapes from the black market. I hope the Minister will consider how to tackle the already expanding black market for these products. That is why

I especially welcome the measures in the Bill to provide the Secretary of State with powers to regulate vaping products, including their content, flavour, packaging and product requirements.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about illegal tobacco and other substances. It is really important that we bear down on that illicit trade. Illegal tobacco not only deprives the Exchequer of funds but means that all kinds of other nefarious activities can take place in the shops that sell it. Also, the illegal cigarettes sold do not extinguish. A few years ago in my constituency there was a house fire with fatalities as a direct result of illegal cigarettes.

Phil Brickell: I thank the right hon. Member for his contribution. I will take assurance from the Minister on that when he winds up.

I place on record my enthusiasm for the separate ban on single-use vapes from June 2025, which the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) mentioned. As other Members have noted, not only are they particularly cheap and therefore accessible to young adults, but they are an inefficient use of critical resources, difficult to recycle and frequently littered around the countryside.

By introducing these world-leading reforms, we can create a smokefree generation and break the cycle of addiction and disadvantage. I am proud that it is a Labour Government who are delivering this legislation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We come to the shadow Minister.

6.21 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Prevention is better than cure. As we have heard, smoking is a cause of many premature deaths and much serious ill health. That was why the previous Government introduced legislation to tackle it and restrict access to tobacco purchases for those born after 1 January 2009. This Bill builds on many measures in the previous one.

As we have heard, this is a Bill of two parts: tobacco and vapes. Those two parts have been received differently, a bit like Marmite and chocolate spread—part controversial, part pretty universally liked. The section on smoking and tobacco has proved to be a bit like Marmite—some people have liked it. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) spoke eloquently of his passion for stop-smoking measures, his successful campaigning, and the previous Government's success in reducing rates of smoking. My hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) spoke eloquently about the balance between libertarianism and choice, and the need for order, societal norms and the protection of others in society. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) spoke about the dangers of smoking and the difficulties and challenges for people trying to quit.

On the other hand, other Members expressed concern about the Bill. The hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) talked about how the Secretary of State might use powers relating to outside places where people may smoke. The hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) shared his concerns about how measures on the age of

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

sale will work in practice. Those will indeed be clunky measures for shopkeepers to try to enforce, and will have an effect on the cohort of individuals who are just either side of the threshold, who will require ID throughout their lives. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) spoke about how that measure will work in Northern Ireland, and although he received some assurances from the Minister, I am not sure that they were completely effective.

Although I confess that I do not like Marmite, it is a free vote this evening for Conservative Members, and I will support the Bill. The Secretary of State said in opening that 350 young people will start smoking today, most of whom will regret it, so why was 1 January 2009 chosen? I appreciate that that was the date in the previous Bill, but why did he choose it for his Bill too?

Let me move on to the area of chocolate spread—the part of the Bill on vaping. I think it was universally welcomed, and was supported by the hon. Members for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) and for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) among others. It includes measures to tackle vaping among children, on which I have personally campaigned. As others have said, the chief medical officer has been clear that for someone who smokes, vaping may be better, but if they do not smoke, they should not vape. As a Member of Parliament and a children's doctor, I have been increasingly concerned about the sharp increase in children addicted to vaping and, more recently, to other nicotine products such as pouches. Schoolteachers have reported that children are unable to concentrate, or even complete a whole lesson, without visiting the bathroom to vape.

Sir John Hayes: I very rarely disagree with my hon. Friend. She is of course right about vaping, the effect that it has on children and the difficulty that schools have in managing it, as headteachers will no doubt have told Members across the House, but can she really go into the Division Lobby to support the Bill with this nonsense about age? The idea that someone aged 30 could smoke and someone aged 29 could not, and the idea that that could be policed or managed in any practical way, is just nonsensical. It was daft when the last Government introduced it, and it is daft now this Government have done so.

Dr Johnson: The challenge is that if we were to ban it altogether, we could risk criminalising people who were already addicted to tobacco products—adults who had made that choice. That is the reason why both present and past Governments put forward a measure to increase the age gradually, but I understand the points that have been made about the difficulties for shopkeepers and others in enforcing it over time.

I return to vaping. Doctors report a growing body of evidence suggesting that children may be having difficulty in school and suffering health problems as a result of vaping. A report from Healthwatch said that 31% of the more than 4,000 under-18s it surveyed were regularly vaping. Nicotine is a powerfully addictive product. Young people are particularly susceptible to it, so it is very important that we protect children from vaping and other nicotine products. After all, vaping is an adult activity; it is apparently designed to help smokers quit. While the industry may argue that the flavours and colours are enjoyed by adults—and they may well

be—I struggle to understand why adults would want a vape flavoured like a unicorn milkshake, whatever a unicorn's milk tastes like. The Healthwatch survey showed that fruit flavours are very popular with children, and the same has been repeated by various teaching unions, the British Medical Association, of which I am a member, Cancer Research UK and even a Government report from last year. I also do not see why an adult stop-smoking device needs to be disguised in the form of a highlighter pen, which could perhaps be hidden in a child's pencil case, or created in the shape of a children's cartoon character. Enticing and luring children into a lifetime of unwanted and potentially harmful addiction is immoral.

The Secretary of State is taking powers to regulate the flavours, colours and packaging of vapes, but how will he ensure that he stays one step ahead of an industry whose income depends on a new generation of addicts? He has taken quite extensive powers, which I know is of concern to some hon. and right hon. Members, but how and when does he intend to use them? What support will be given to children who are already addicted to vaping to help them quit?

Finally, while this is a free vote issue, I am pleased on a personal level to see some of the proposals that I put forward on the last Bill being incorporated into this one, particularly on the sponsorship and advertising of vending machines. Whatever our views on this Bill, it is a bold piece of legislation of good intention. It aims to improve the health of our nation and of our children in particular and to reduce smoking and prevent nicotine addiction in the young. It is not clear whether it will work, but we have to hope, for the health of all of us and our children, that it does.

6.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): It is a pleasure to close this debate on behalf of the Government. I commend my hon. Friends the Members for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon), for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter), for Worthing West (Dr Cooper), for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey), for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis), for Dartford (Jim Dickson), for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle), for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) and for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) and, on the Opposition Benches, the hon. Members for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for Lewes (James MacCleary), for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan), for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for South Antrim (Robin Swann), the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) and the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon), for a series of outstanding contributions this afternoon. Many of us on the Labour Benches remember the last Labour Government's proud history of public health measures—indeed, some of us were in this place at the time. From the indoor smoking ban to putting an end to cigarette advertising, we took the bold action to drive down smoking prevalence, and the country is still feeling the benefits of those policies today. However, after 14 years of public health neglect, we have seen much of our hard work squandered. Health inequalities have grown worse, and life expectancy is stalling. Most appallingly, life expectancy is going into reverse in some communities.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): I welcome this Bill. Some 6,000 children in Greater Manchester take up smoking each year, allowing tobacco and vape companies to profit from increasing health inequalities. If we eradicate smoking, Greater Manchester's economy will gain over £2.5 billion each year, funds that could be allocated to our health and social care sector. Does the Minister agree that if we follow the recommendations of the smoking review by Professor Javed Khan OBE, who did an excellent job on that review, we have the unique opportunity to both save lives and reduce poverty, creating a healthier and more equal society?

Andrew Gwynne: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution, not least because it allows me to place on record this Government's thanks to Javed Khan for the work he did in his review of smoking. My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head, because in the parts of Greater Manchester that he and I represent, health inequalities are stark and visible. We are going to turn them around. Our health mission pledged to tackle the social inequalities that influence health, and to ensure that children have the very best start possible, in which they are given the building blocks for a healthy life. That will be an immense challenge, but every member of this Government is up for the battle.

Colleagues have made a number of points, and I will try to answer as many as I can in the time we have left. First, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East for the work he has done on this issue over a number of years. I assure him that all tobacco products are covered by this Bill, including the chewing tobacco product that he referred to. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham, who has also been a passionate spokesperson for tackling smoking harm, is absolutely right to raise the issue of article 5.3. The new Labour Government take very seriously their obligations as a party to the World Health Organisation's framework convention on tobacco control, and we remain fully committed to that convention, including the important commitment, under article 5.3, to protecting public health policies on tobacco control from

“commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry”.

The shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), referred to the powers to bring in smokefree places. We will consult on extending smokefree places to include areas outside schools, children's playgrounds and hospitals in England. We believe that strikes the right balance between protecting the most vulnerable and recognising the pressures facing the hospitality sector. I want to make the shadow Secretary of State aware, though, that the Bill was designed in full consultation with, and to meet the needs of, the devolved Governments across the whole of the United Kingdom. It is a UK Bill, with powers that meet the requirements of each of the component parts of our country, and I reiterate that as far as England is concerned, this Government will seek to consult on schools, children's playgrounds and hospitals only.

A number of Members, including the hon. Member for Harrow East, raised the topic of stop smoking services. We are putting an extra £70 million into local stop smoking services, which could help with up to 200,000 successful quits a year. We are still rolling out a smokefree pregnancy incentive scheme, which will support pregnant

women in quitting and ensure that more babies do not suffer a hit to their life chances before they are even born.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am very sorry that I was not in the Chamber for the beginning of the debate. I have very strong views on this matter, because my father died of cancer—I quit 20 years ago, thank God. It occurs to me that we have heard from other people who have quit, and that we who have quit could be mobilised to help others quit. Why do the Government not use us? We could do a lot of good and provide a lot of help.

Andrew Gwynne: I think the hon. Gentleman has just talked himself into a job. He is absolutely right that the best people to advocate for stopping smoking are former smokers.

We will still encourage adult smokers to switch to vaping through Swap to Stop in England, and I am delighted that localities have asked for over half a million starter kits so far. On advertising regulations, of course the consultation will take place after Royal Assent, but I hope that I can assure the hon. Member for Harrow East that we will take away his point about ensuring that the NHS can still advertise Swap to Stop under those regulations.¹ On a tobacco industry levy, fiscal matters are for the Treasury, but I am sure that his views and those of others have been communicated to Treasury Ministers.

The hon. Member for Lewes mentioned the rise of the black market. This is a line that has been parroted by the tobacco industry for years, so we need to spell out the facts. Whenever Governments of any guise have introduced targeted tobacco control measures, the black market actually has not prospered. Consumption of illegal tobacco has gone from 15 billion cigarettes nearly 25 years ago to just one 10th of that amount last year, and when the last Labour Government raised the age of sale from 16 to 18, the number of illicit cigarettes fell by a quarter. However, this requires better enforcement, and we will use every second of the generously long buffer period to support businesses in preparing for and implementing the changes, including through information campaigns. We are providing £10 million to trading standards to increase their capacity and capabilities next year, and there is £100 million for Border Force and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs over the next five years to tackle illicit and under-age sales. The Bill also allows trading standards to issue on-the-spot fines of £200, and to reinvest the proceeds of those fines, and indeed the licensing regime, back into further enforcement.

Bob Blackman: Will the Minister consider ensuring that the fines are raised by at least inflation each year? Fines could be increased on a scale, to make sure that they keep progress with changes.

Andrew Gwynne: We have already doubled the fine proposed in the previous Government's Bill, which is a step. I listened very carefully to the hon. Gentleman's argument, and he might wish to pursue it in Committee, should he be fortunate enough to be a Committee member. I look forward to the debates we might have.

A number of questions about the licensing regime were posed by the shadow Secretary of State, as well as by the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan),

1.[*Official Report*, 2 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 1WC.] (Correction)

[*Andrew Gwynne*]

the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and others. I reassure the House that across the sector, there is broad consensus among retailers about a licensing scheme; more than four fifths of them have expressed their support. Unlike alcohol, there is no licensing requirement for tobacco. A lot of people outside this House would find that hard to understand. They assume that convenience stores, supermarkets and other places that sell alcohol are licensed in a similar way to sell tobacco products, but that is not the case. We will bring in a licensing scheme, because we know that will have a huge public health impact, as other licensing regimes do.

Tristan Osborne: When I was on a council, I had a portfolio managing licensing. Councils already manage significant licensing functions, so it would be very convenient to simply add this function to those. That would not necessarily be a significant bureaucratic hurdle, as has been said.

Andrew Gwynne: Local government will take the lead on this matter, and we will consult widely on how we bring forward the licensing regime, and on how we implement it through secondary legislation, following that consultation. An impact assessment will be prepared before the secondary legislation is introduced, but I want to work with local government across England—I am sure that ministerial counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom seeking to bring in a licensing regime will do the same—to ensure that we get this right for local government. That includes ensuring that the cost of running a licensing regime is met by the regime itself.

Mr Brash: We have mentioned the fact that local government is responsible for public health. I have had our director of public health email me just today to say how supportive they are of this Bill. Local government wants this opportunity to try to improve the health of local people. The fears that local government would be under pressure are simply wrong, are they not?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. From the engagement that I have had with members across all parties in local government—elected members, officers and directors of public health—I know that they want these measures. They are up for introducing them, and for helping us to get them right.

The hon. Member for North Shropshire raised the issue of ID checks, as did a number of others. I gently say to those who expressed a degree of scepticism that most retailers already follow recommended practice and regularly ask customers for ID. We are stopping people from ever starting smoking, and 83% of smokers start before the age of 20. That means that someone who has never previously smoked is highly unlikely to want to take up smoking later in life. Our published modelling shows that smoking rates in England for 14 to 30-year-olds could be close to 0% as early as 2050 with the measures in this Bill.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As a former teacher, I hope that the Government are working across Departments. Will we work with the Department

for Education to ensure that these conversations are had in our schools, right from the beginning, at primary level, and all the way through?

Andrew Gwynne: That is absolutely crucial. With this legislation, we have to make sure that we do not take our foot off the pedal when it comes to education and informing the next generation of children of the harms of smoking and vaping through our public health initiative.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): My constituents in Paisley and Renfrewshire South need a health service that moves from sickness to prevention, so can my hon. Friend confirm that this UK-wide Bill will impact my constituents? Has he had discussions with the Scottish Government about ensuring its implementation north of the border?

Andrew Gwynne: That is an important point, and it allows me to place on record my thanks to the Health Ministers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for how they have approached our desire to bring all parts of the United Kingdom together to make a smokefree United Kingdom, not just a smokefree England, through this legislation. I hope that I can reassure my hon. Friend that I have had incredibly fruitful conversations with the Health Minister in the SNP Scottish Government. She is as wedded and committed to this Bill and its measures as we are in this House today. I am reassured that across the whole United Kingdom, we will be walking in step to ensure that the next generation of children never takes up smoking.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Gwynne: I will not give way now, as I have to end my speech. I know that you are keeping a careful eye on the clock, Madam Deputy Speaker.

If I had had more time, I would have talked about the huge public health benefits of the Bill that will do so much to prevent death, dementia and disability in old age. I could have gone into further detail about the economic benefits of the Bill, such as getting people back into work and saving untold sums of money for our NHS, but, from my perspective, the single most important thing that the Bill will do is tackle those stark inequalities across our country, because this fight is personal to me.

I have seen the harmful effects of tobacco on the people around me my entire life. As a schoolboy, I was educated about the harms of smoking, but it did nothing to stop a number of my peers from getting addicted to cigarettes. As an MP, I have seen at first hand how tobacco has devastated deprived communities across our country, not least in Greater Manchester. As the Minister for public health, I am determined to end the cycle of poverty and ill health, the blight of addiction, disease and despair caused by smoking. No longer will it sap the strength of our cities—Stoke, Sunderland, Salford and so many others. This is the will of His Majesty's Government, this is the promise of the Bill, and I urge colleagues across the House to vote with us to protect their constituents and do the right thing.

Question put. That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 415, Noes 47.

Division No. 48]

[6.46 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, Heidi
 Allister, Jim
 Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Aquarone, Steff
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Cane, Charlotte

Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Chadwick, David
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Victoria
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, Daisy
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doogan, Dave
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Easton, Alex
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark

Flynn, rh Stephen
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foord, Richard
 Fortune, Peter
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glen, rh John
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldman, Marie
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir

Kearns, Alicia
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lightwood, Simon
 Logan, Seamus
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Maguire, Ben
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Martin, Mike
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayer, Alex
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Medi, Llinos
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Munt, Tessa
 Murphy, Luke

Murray, Chris
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Raja, Shivani
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mr Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff

Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Jamie
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Luke
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Cameron
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vickers, Martin
 Vince, Chris
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williams, David
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wishart, Pete
 Witherden, Steve
 Wood, Mike
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Wrigley, Martin
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Young, Claire
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Christian Wakeford and
 Kate Dearden

NOES

Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Babarinde, Josh
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bool, Sarah
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Dean, Bobby
 Dewhirst, Charlie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Farron, Tim
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Fuller, Richard
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdock, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Paul, Rebecca
 Reed, David
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Spencer, Patrick
 Stephenson, Blake
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard

Tellers for the Noes:
 Sir Edward Leigh and
 Sir Christopher Chope

Question accordingly agreed to.
Bill read a Second time.

TOBACCO AND VAPES BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Tobacco and Vapes Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 30 January 2025.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(Chris Elmore.)

Question agreed to.

TOBACCO AND VAPES 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 Tobacco and Vapes Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—
(*Chris Elmore.*)

Question agreed to.

TOBACCO AND VAPES BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the charging of fees under or by virtue of the Act, and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—
(*Chris Elmore.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Ombudsman Scheme) (Fees) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 20 May 2024, in the last Parliament, be approved.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

Question agreed to.

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

CLIMATE CHANGE

That the draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (No. 2) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 21 October, be approved.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Pimping websites and paying for sex

7.2 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents regarding commercial sexual exploitation—the day after the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and on day two of the United Nations’ 16 days of activism. Perpetrated primarily against women and girls, the global trade in sexual exploitation is bigger than ever. We know that demand from the minority of men who pay for sex is driving the prostitution and sex trafficking trade, and that this sexual exploitation is being facilitated by pimping websites that are free to advertise their victims with impunity.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to outlaw pimping websites and paying for sex, and provide support, not sanctions, to victims of sexual exploitation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Gower,

Declares that demand from the minority of men who pay for sex is driving the prostitution and sex trafficking trade, and this sexual exploitation is being facilitated by pimping websites that operate with impunity.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to outlaw pimping websites and paying for sex, and provide support, not sanctions, to victims of sexual exploitation.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003020]

Coastal Infrastructure: Scotland

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

7.4 pm

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Scotland's history is intertwined with our coastal communities. From shipbuilding on the Clyde to fishing off Peterhead and Fraserburgh, these areas helped fuel the UK's growth as a global power. Closer to my home, the Forth estuary has a proud industrial legacy. Longannet power station, near Kincardine, once powered UK industry and, to this day, the Babcock dockyard in Rosyth plays a pivotal role in naval shipbuilding. The Forth remains an active and busy waterway, with tankers and barges constantly on the move. None the less, in common with other areas, the decline in industry in the Forth is obvious. In some places, industry has been partially replaced by tourism, with 9 million visitors coming to Fife last year and contributing £570 million to the local economy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for bringing forward this issue. I congratulate him on securing his second Adjournment debate in two weeks, which is fantastic. As he will know, he and I—if we go back far enough—are Gaelic cousins: I am descended from the Stewarts of the lowlands of Scotland, who came across to Northern Ireland. It is very important for us in Northern Ireland and those across the Irish sea to have a relationship through tourism. Does the hon. Member agree that greater support and funding for the ferry service between our two great countries, and therefore for tourism, would only yield greater connectivity and prosperity for both our nations? I know that many people in my constituency go to Scotland every year for a holiday, and I am sure that the same applies in the other direction.

Graeme Downie: I could not agree more. I had the pleasure of being in Belfast just a couple of weeks ago for a family occasion. I was not able to take the ferry on that short trip—sadly, I had to fly—but I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman's point.

For coastal communities in my constituency, such as Kincardine, Culross and Torryburn, tourism is indeed a welcome industry, with the Fife coastal path and the Pilgrim Way welcoming thousands of people a year to enjoy the beautiful Fife coastline. Across Scotland in 2022, marine and coastal tourism was worth £633 million, providing a total of 31,000 jobs. However, although tourism is welcomed by such communities, it can bring difficulties as well. Villages that were never designed to deal with hundreds or thousands of visitors sometimes feel swamped, with locals understandably resentful. The situation has not been aided over the years by SNP cuts to local council budgets, which have delayed upgrades to critical infrastructure, including roads, paths, play parks and other local facilities.

However, our coastal communities are not just scenic backdrops but economic powerhouses, cultural treasures and key players in our green future. They need our continued support and investment. In August this year, the Prime Minister said that our coastal communities are the lifeblood of Britain's maritime economy. From supporting international trade to driving innovation in

renewable energy, these areas must be at the heart of our plans to build a stronger, greener, and more prosperous future for the UK.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining his second Adjournment debate. Does he agree that in the transition away from industrial ports and towards tourism, both the UK and Scottish Governments must invest to avoid the pressure of tourism hotspots? We must use the full force of both Governments, and of capital, to invest in and change our ports to make them fit for the green transition to renewables. Given the challenge of climate change, does he agree that we must defend our coastal communities and invest in causeways such as the Baleshare causeway in my constituency, and in ports and harbours all around the coast, to make sure that they are defended from rising tides and the effects of climate change?

Graeme Downie: Once again, I could not agree more. My hon. Friend has the pleasure of representing one of the most beautiful parts of the world, and I have been able to spend a bit of time there. He is absolutely correct about the challenges that our coastal communities face, and programmes such as Great British Energy have huge potential for green jobs. We must always make sure that the transition is carried out with sensitivity and in partnership with communities wherever we can.

The Prime Minister is someone with whom I would always choose to agree, and I could not agree more with his views on coastal communities and the maritime economy. The national wealth fund announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer is a potentially transformative opportunity for our coastal communities, with at least £5.8 billion of the NWF's capital focused on sectors such as ports, green hydrogen, carbon capture, gigafactories and green steel.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I also congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. On offshore renewables, which I know he will be mentioning, Scottish communities will obviously have a huge amount to contribute. Does he agree that we need to look for inclusion in the European energy markets for those greatly expanded offshore renewables? Does he also agree that we need to look into the issue of transmission charging? I know he will be aware of that as well.

Graeme Downie: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Given the additional co-operation we are seeing between the UK and Scottish Governments, with the UK Labour Government in power and resetting that relationship, there will absolutely be opportunities to work together for the benefit of all parts of the United Kingdom on energy.

In 2022, passenger and freight water transport was worth £250 million to the Scottish economy and supported 1,600 jobs. The port of Rosyth in my constituency currently handles 600,000 tonnes of bulk cargo, ranging across a variety of incomes, including road salt, which has been much needed in the past week. It was definitely required in Fife, as I found out on my trip to the airport earlier this week. In addition, the port of Rosyth works with oil and gas companies for the import and export of vital industrial components, and when I was near the port recently, I could also see turbine blades and other components for renewable energy sitting on the dockside—a sign of the future, hopefully, for my constituency.

The Rosyth waterfront, currently being cleaned up by the Scarborough Muir Group, was once home to a 250,000-tonne capacity concrete tank and 5,000-tonne steel tanks, all used to fuel the fleet during world war two. The development of the site offers a further exciting glimpse into the possible future of the Fife coast, given the required sustained investment. The green freeport offers exciting opportunities up and down the Forth estuary on both sides, with plans for Rosyth including additional freight and passenger transport and improved rail link options, all of which take freight off the roads while at the same time providing new jobs and helping us on the pathway to achieving net zero.

Over the longer-term trend, the Scottish marine economy contracted by 14% between 2013 and 2022, a shocking decline for which both the SNP and Tory Governments must carry the can. We must do more to support our coastal economy, and there is one specific measure on which I would like to focus in the remainder of my time. Between 2002 and 2018, there was a direct ferry line from Rosyth to Zeebrugge operating as a passenger and freight service, and latterly as a freight-only service. I believe, as many of my constituents do, that now is the time to bring this project back. To that end, I have held several discussions with those co-ordinating these efforts, as well as with DFDS Ferries, which has said that it would like to bring the service back as soon as spring 2025, but between Rosyth and Dunkirk instead.

Additional investment in the port of Dunkirk, including on facilities and additional upgrading of freight and rail, makes this an optimal moment to bring back this service from Scotland to Europe. The facilities at Dunkirk are ready and the national wealth fund would appear to be the ideal opportunity for this Government to take the lead on developing the facilities at Rosyth that are needed to make that happen. Never mind £5.8 billion, it could take as little as a £3 million investment in Rosyth to bring back a regular passenger and freight service between Scotland and mainland Europe, but time is of the essence if it is to be fully realised. With £3 million of funding, we could get a jump-start on all of this as soon as spring 2025.

This Government have said that they want to move quickly with investments that deliver. To my mind, there is no better example of that than getting a passenger and freight ferry back up and running between Scotland and mainland Europe, with Rosyth perfectly positioned for the service. The infrastructure needed is not extensive. All that is needed is improvement of some of the access roads, space for new security checks and the installation of power and associated works. It is estimated that a direct ferry link would carry 51,000 passengers per year, rising to 79,000, and bring an additional £11.5 million spend to the Scottish economy each year. On freight, it is estimated that the route would begin by carrying 22,000 freight units per year, taking 8.2 million km of freight traffic off UK roads, with a corresponding reduction in carbon emissions.

The kind of increased passenger and freight links that I want to see in Rosyth would revitalise the economy not only in my constituency but across Fife more broadly and would support the Government's net zero ambitions while underpinning the Scotland Office's plans for Brand Scotland, selling Scotland to the world. I have spoken to major employers in the constituency, including Amazon and Mowi, which have both said that they would welcome

this ferry link as it would help their contribution to the local economy. Mowi plays a key part in the Scotland Office's Brand Scotland efforts by promoting and selling Scottish salmon to the world.

There are other hurdles that would need to be overcome in order to finalise bringing the service back to Rosyth, including addressing the failure of the SNP Scottish Government to amend the necessary legislation that would allow border control at Grangemouth to be used for Rosyth for certain freight. There is also the matter of the delay by the Scottish Government in confirming Transport Scotland funding for the waterborne freight grant. While the SNP continues to delay and make excuses at its end, this Labour Government have the opportunity to jump-start this process.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the important Rosyth connection, and I pay tribute to him and his predecessor for their good work. He is always good natured about these things, but he will notice that neighbouring Ireland has opened up more than a dozen such routes. Why does he think that is? Does he think that membership of the single market would be enormously helpful in opening up some of these routes and further benefiting our coastal communities?

Graeme Downie: The hon. Gentleman is right that I should pay tribute to my predecessor, Douglas Chapman, who did much to champion this cause. My point is that we can do this in the current situation, and that is what we should be doing as quickly as possible.

This debate is about how to get investment back into our coastal communities, and what better opportunity than a passenger and freight link between Rosyth and central Europe? As I discussed with my hon. Friend on the Front Bench prior to this evening's debate, I wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the start of October, but I received a reply only very recently, and I suspect only because this debate was on the Order Paper. This is disappointing, particularly given the small amount of money and the deadline to make this project a reality in 2025.

Of course, I do not expect my hon. Friend to be able to make any commitments this evening, and I certainly do not expect him to speak on behalf of the Treasury. However, it is critical that the Government deliver for Scotland in a visible and meaningful way as quickly as possible, by progressing projects that further Brand Scotland, which is a fantastic policy programme that sells Scotland to the world, benefiting people across my constituency and across Scotland. What actions are the Scotland Office taking to bring the correct partners around the table to make the Rosyth to Dunkirk ferry a possibility as quickly as possible, so that the option of bringing it back in 2025 can at least be seriously explored?

Whether it is restoring the Rosyth ferry, addressing infrastructure challenges or unlocking the potential of initiatives such as the green freeports, now is the time to act. By working together, we can ensure that our coastal communities thrive for generations to come.

7.16 pm

Martin McCluskey (Inverclyde and Renfrewshire West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) on securing

[*Martin McCluskey*]

this debate. As others have said, this is his second Adjournment debate in a matter of weeks, so the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) might have some competition. I represent a coastal constituency, so I am pleased to respond on behalf of the Government.

I am sure the whole House will agree when I say that the UK is blessed with a wonderful coastline, and nowhere more so than in Scotland. As much as it might pain me as the MP for Inverclyde and Renfrewshire West to admit that there are some beautiful stretches of coastline that are not in reach of Wemyss bay, Inverkip, Greenock, Gourock or Port Glasgow, I will grudgingly admit to my hon. Friend that the Fife coastline is indeed beautiful and, as he has highlighted this evening, has the potential to contribute to the growth of our economy, particularly through our world-class ports. We have heard about his proposal for Rosyth, to which I will return later.

Ports will play a crucial role in the development and deployment of the offshore energy projects that are essential to meeting our clean energy mission, as well as facilitating the international trade that is vital to meeting our mission of turbocharging economic growth. It is therefore right that we support these communities with the infrastructure they need to thrive. That is why the UK Government have announced the creation of the national wealth fund, backed with £7.3 billion, including £5.8 billion of capital funding for five priority sectors, including port infrastructure. This will drive investment in ports across the country, delivering the change we need to achieve our mission of growing the economy.

The national wealth fund will build on the work of the UK Infrastructure Bank, which has a strong track record of investing in port infrastructure across the UK. Indeed, the national wealth fund is providing £50 million, which has been matched by the Scottish National Investment Bank, towards a £100 million joint credit facility for the Ardersier port. This project demonstrates the potential of our national wealth fund investments. The site is currently the largest brownfield port in the UK but, when complete, it will become a nationally significant infrastructure facility, spanning 450 acres. This game-changing investment will redevelop the port, developing its capacity to deploy offshore wind infrastructure at an industrial scale, driving forward our net zero ambitions. I make it clear to my hon. Friend and other Members that this project is just a start, and further details on securing national wealth fund funding will be set out in due course.

My hon. Friend set out his vision for the port of Rosyth. I would be delighted to assist him, alongside officials in the Scotland Office, in his engagement with the national wealth fund for projects in his constituency. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has been crystal clear that if growth is the challenge, investment is the solution. That is why this Government will invest in the jobs, industries and infrastructure of the future through the national wealth fund and GB Energy.

Alongside that, our new industrial strategy, currently being developed by the UK Government in consultation with the Scottish Government, sets a credible 10-year plan to deliver the certainty and stability businesses need to invest in the high growth sectors that will drive our growth mission. The strategy will take advantage of

the UK's unique strengths and untapped potential, enabling our already world-leading sectors to adapt and grow, and seizing opportunities to lead in new and emerging areas.

Many of the priority sectors identified in the emerging strategy, such as clean energy and defence, will directly benefit and build on the strengths of our coastal communities. The strategy will take a place-based approach, driving growth in towns, cities and regions around Britain. We will work tirelessly to deliver growth through this strategy for communities across the UK.

We will also look internationally for opportunities. As my hon. Friend set out, increasing export markets for Scottish businesses are crucial for our success. That is why we are committed to promoting Brand Scotland around the world. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland is currently in south-east Asia meeting businesses and Government Ministers to encourage investment here at home.

However, we cannot go it alone. As others have said, we must work closely with the Scottish Government, combining our respective powers to deliver on these ambitions, which is why we are resetting the relationship with the Scottish Government. Across a range of areas, we are working together with them to deliver for communities and strengthen our economy. We are backing the Scottish Government to deliver, with a record block grant of £47.7 billion for 2025-26, with a further £3.4 billion via the Barnett formula. That is the largest settlement in real terms since devolution began.

As a result of the decisions that this Government have taken, we have been able to confirm the UK Government's commitment to investing nearly £1.4 billion in important local projects across Scotland over the next 10 years. I am delighted to say that that includes £26 million for the Forth freeport, subject to full business case approval. The Forth green freeport is expected to support thousands of jobs and bring in millions of pounds of investment across its sites in Edinburgh, Fife and Falkirk. Local partners estimate that it could create up to 34,500 jobs and generate £7.9 billion of private and public investment over the next decade.

My hon. Friend mentioned that he has written to the Treasury regarding possible upgrades to the port of Rosyth. I am aware that the Chancellor has recently responded to his correspondence and, as I said earlier, I would be delighted to assist him in engaging with the national wealth fund. If he would like a further discussion with the Treasury on that subject, I would be happy to facilitate a meeting with my noble friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury for him to discuss the issue further.

As my hon. Friend said, decisions also need to be made by the Scottish Government. Engagement and support from the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland will be necessary to deliver the project he mentions. I encourage Scottish Government Ministers and officials to engage closely with my hon. Friend to discuss the proposals in more detail. I will do all I can to support him in fighting for opportunities for growth in his constituency, and I know that both the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Minister for Scotland share this desire.

May I once again pay tribute to my hon. Friend, and to Members who have intervened in the debate? I am sure they will join me in agreeing that this is a vital issue

that we must get right to ensure Scottish coastal communities play their rightful role at the heart of this Government's ambitious agenda.

Question put and agreed to.

7.23 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 26 November 2024

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Electricity Grid Upgrades

9.30 am

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the delivery of electricity grid upgrades.

It is wonderful to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am grateful to have the opportunity of this debate.

I chair a cross-party group of MPs from Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk. We are working to promote the Clean Power 2030 objective, but we want to deliver it more cheaply and quickly, because it is becoming increasingly clear that undergrounding high voltage direct current cables is the way forward for the great national grid upgrade. Undergrounding will carry public consent and will avoid delays, and will therefore be cheaper as well as better for the countryside. Relying on new lines of pylons for the entire upgrade, as proposed, will delay decarbonising the national grid, because they arouse such hostility and will end up costing more because of the delays.

This debate is therefore not just local. Decarbonisation is one of the great national challenges that the United Kingdom faces. How it is achieved, how quickly and at what cost is an issue of national importance. The National Energy System Operator's "Clean Power 2030" report is welcome, but it highlights the scale of the challenge. NESO is clear that public support is critical to achieving those ambitions, but its response to the Secretary of State in that document warns that losing public consent is a significant threat to delivering projects on time and within budget.

Fintan Slye, the executive director of NESO, made the importance of engaging community support clear on Radio 4 when the report was launched on 5 November:

"I am acutely people conscious that building infrastructure, pylons, does impose on people and their locality."

He also emphasised that

"it is really important...that we bring people and communities with us on this journey",

and that the transition to net zero only works

"if we can bring society with us".

He is clearly saying that infrastructure solutions must align with community priorities.

The challenge to install new capacity is enormous. The UK has around 14 GW of offshore wind capacity but, to meet future energy demands, that capacity will need to grow nearly threefold by 2030 and continue expanding so it can handle 125 GW of wind by 2050. That is a much faster rate of investment than we have seen so far, but projects for 2030 are already falling behind. Given the strength of public opposition to overhead pylons, it is highly unlikely that any pylon proposals will be delivered on time.

The "Clean Power 2030" report sets out how delays are already affecting key projects such as the one from Norwich to Tilbury, which is 184 km of pylons across Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. NESO says that it will now be delayed by a year to 2031, and that delay is very costly. NESO estimates that the cost of delay is £4 billion a year—far higher than previous estimates—mainly because of the constraint payments that have to be paid to wind power generators.

Given the public opposition to the Norwich to Tilbury project, the funds being amassed for legal challenges, and the opportunity for judicial review at least twice during the process, it is likely to be delayed for far longer than just one year. That risk is likely to apply to the other 17 pylon schemes proposed in the great grid upgrade. Nevertheless, National Grid plans to use overhead pylons as the primary infrastructure for the massive reinforcement of the national grid. I put it to the Minister that the current concept is not deliverable.

The implication is clear. The way to secure public consent is by pursuing strategies that respect and protect local communities and what they value—their property, their livelihoods and the countryside.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): My hon. Friend has done a fantastic job in this area. He has been very persuasive in setting out the damage done to his constituency. Does he agree that the strength of the OffSET group—the offshore electricity grid taskforce—demonstrates that the issue is going to affect communities right across East Anglia, including Margaretting village in my constituency, and that therefore the opposition he talks about is likely to be very strong across the whole region?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: My right hon. Friend is completely right. It affects other colleagues, including some present here today representing, for example, Lincolnshire. We know that there are concerns in north Wales, and on the east coast of Scotland in the area represented by my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who is representing the Opposition Front Bench. This is a very widespread problem.

Undergrounding HVDC cables is not only technically viable, but the most sensible and sustainable solution for the future of our energy network—that is, if we cannot have it offshore. I acknowledge that quite a lot is going offshore, but it rubs salt in the wound that other areas, from Scotland to north-east England, have the luxury of offshore schemes, but we in East Anglia do not. Our countryside is not worth the investment.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): It is interesting to hear the hon. Member talk about delays and the issues with floating offshore wind. Does he agree that we should look at why we have such delays? After 14 years of Conservative Government, one might have thought that many of the challenges would already have been dealt with. Does he acknowledge that many of the current issues are because of a lack of action over the last 14 years?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I accept that the present Government have inherited a planning system and a philosophy of upgrading the national grid that is out of date.

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

When we were in Government, we were very slow to recognise that such a big, strategic upgrade needed a proper strategy. We started moving towards holistic network design. We commissioned a report from Charles Banner KC to look at streamlining the planning process—I will come on to putting that streamlining in place—and I very much welcome that the Government have commissioned a spatial review of the entire network, which should have been done years ago. I think we were blind to the failings of the structure inherited from the Electricity Act 1989; we should have moved much sooner.

That report should make it easier for the Government to change the out-of-date policy of a presumption in favour of pylons, which we said in our manifesto that we would review. I am very happy for the Minister to blame the previous Government for the difficulties he is facing and to change the policy accordingly, but it will be very odd if he comes to the Dispatch Box to defend what the previous Government were doing, after what the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) just said—but I suspect that that is what he will do.

I put this issue forward in a bipartisan manner. We should all be able to agree that the great grid upgrade is not going fast enough, and that we need to streamline the planning process and speed up delivery. However, we also need to mend our ideas about how we deliver it, because as I have said, undergrounding high voltage direct current cables is not only technically viable, but the most sensible and sustainable solution for the future of our entire energy network.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I would like to return to the hon. Member's point about international comparisons and other countries nearby perhaps having a presumption in favour of overgrounding. I draw the House's attention to the fact that Germany's Opposition recently said that using overhead lines instead of digging underground could save the country €35 billion, and that the German political parties that previously, as part of Angela Merkel's coalition, backed underground cables have now called for overhead lines to be given priority. Does the hon. Member agree that the picture is not quite so clearcut in mainland Europe?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: What is interesting about Germany is that its presumption was in favour of undergrounding, so the idea that that is a great big experiment and we do not know what it means is incorrect. There is plenty of expertise in Europe. When we look at cost comparisons between undergrounding and pylons, it also depends on the territory we are dealing with.

Our problem is lack of community consent, as Fintan Slye, the executive director of the National Energy System Operator, rightly says. It is a question of swings and roundabouts, but in the case of Norwich to Tilbury, the consequence of delays from trying to run roughshod over the very widespread and well-funded public opposition will be to put up the cost, which makes the cost of undergrounding advantageous over pylons. That is my point.

I am not necessarily disagreeing with the principle of what the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) says, but undergrounding DC cables has great

advantages. The latest estimated cost of just one year's delay for Norwich to Tilbury is four times more than the additional £1 billion cost of undergrounding HVDC—I hope the hon. Gentleman was listening to that: £4 billion a year for delay against £1 billion extra for DC undergrounding. I think that puts this into the field of a no-brainer. Why would we spend all that money fighting through the courts for a very unpopular scheme when we could save time and legal expense by going for a different method?

In the National Energy System Operator's East Anglia network study, which was published earlier this year, undergrounding HVDC was set out as alternative option 8. The great advantage of undergrounding HVDC is that there will be far less public resistance. Moreover, as I have said, the planning procedures could be streamlined—as recommended to the Government recently by Charles Banner—to conform to the regime for installing new major water pipes. If we had the same planning regime for underground cables as we did for water pipes, we could speed up the process for undergrounding cables.

Underground HVDC offers a scalable, future-proof solution that can be delivered with far less environmental impact, with public support and much more quickly. Schemes without pylons that are already planned by National Grid—for example, in north-east England—are being delivered without public opposition or long delays, which seems to be an enormous advantage for the Government's objective of decarbonising the grid. There is no comparable resistance from campaign groups, which is clear evidence that underground HVDC gets public support, making it a far more practical and feasible solution.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I pay tribute to the hard work that the hon. Member has done cross-party on this issue for many years, and I am grateful to be joining that as another east of England MP. The issue of public consent is important, because the proposals could have such a huge impact on local communities. Developers suggest that they could provide community benefits, but with all due respect, the idea of having a community hall 5 miles down the road does not mitigate having massive pylons going past someone's back garden. Does the hon. Member agree that the problem with regard to public consent is that people who are very well organised will understandably continue to kick up a fuss, which will delay the creation of the renewable energy that we absolutely need and certainly support?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's intervention. As the new Liberal Democrat MP for Chelmsford, she demonstrates that this is a cross-party campaign, supported by people who are as committed to decarbonisation as anything else.

As has been said, there is no comparable resistance from campaign groups in the north-east of England. That is clear evidence that underground HVDC receives public support, making it a far more practical and feasible solution.

In East Anglia, the opposition to overhead pylons is not subsiding; it is growing and becoming more intense. Campaign groups are united in their resistance to this outdated approach to infrastructure. The Government, including the Minister, have made it clear that local

campaigners will not be able to block their nationally important mission to build clean energy infrastructure across the UK. We are not blocking; we are trying to help. In my constituency, one local group wrote to National Grid, in response to a consultation, saying:

“By all means, build closer to our houses and shorten the route, just put it underground.”

That demonstrates that communities are not opposed to infrastructure or the objectives behind it. They are just against bad decisions to achieve it.

I mentioned streamlining the planning system to bring it into line with what is required of water companies laying major water pipes. There is a massive underground Anglian water pipe being installed from Bury St Edmunds, across my constituency to Abberton reservoir in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel). That includes digging a trench through the sensitive landscape of Dedham vale across the Stour valley, almost exactly where the pylons or alternating current undergrounding will go. Nobody is objecting to that underground scheme. I have not had a whimper of complaint about that pipe going in.

Why stick to pylons when that method is slower and delays will make it far more expensive? The Government may argue, as the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) mentioned, that community benefits will compensate for the disruption to affected areas caused by pylons, but those ideas will not buy off the hostility to pylons and other unwanted infrastructure. Solutions that respect communities and their interests, as well as deliver for our energy network, are the future.

For Norwich to Tilbury, the onshore undergrounding HVDC proposal will cause significantly less environmental damage than overhead cables and AC undergrounding. Let me expand on that. For a start, the entire route would be underground, not just through the sensitive landscapes. The cable trenches required for undergrounding HVDC cables are far narrower than for AC cables.

AC undergrounding is proposed for the area of outstanding natural beauty, the special landscape area that I share with my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge). That requires a 120-metre-wide trench, because AC cables need to be spaced out. That means a very wide swathe of destruction, as that vast trench is dug and refilled, and everything in its path is destroyed.

It is extremely expensive to avoid going through archaeological sites. The Stour valley is an archaeological site of the same importance as Stonehenge. If there had been stones in the Stour valley, we would have a Stonehenge, because there is evidence of a wooden henge. Ancient tribes lived there in prehistoric times and it was a significant area throughout Roman times and the middle ages.

All of that is at risk, in addition to the massive destruction of trees, ancient woodland and hedges, in order to install AC underground cables. I am all for mitigating the effect of pylons by undergrounding, but let us not kid ourselves that it is a solution for the most sensitive areas of landscape. It is also much more expensive to underground AC cables than DC cables. I would very much like the proposal to underground cables to be extended to other areas, such as the Roman River valley, which is technically not in the special landscape area but is just as special. The Government have an

obligation to respect sensitive countryside, so that could be another cause for a judicial review. A much better solution would be to underground DC, not AC, cables through that sensitive landscape.

Another reason why this proposal is so advantageous is that offshore DC to onshore AC requires huge DC-to-AC converters at the cable end points. When DC current generated by a wind farm lands somewhere such as Friston in the constituency of Suffolk Coastal, there has to be a massive DC-to-AC converter for it to go into the AC grid network. If we started building a DC grid network—for example, if energy ran all the way from Norwich to Tilbury on a DC line—all those connections could go straight into the DC network, avoiding the need for extra infrastructure. Incidentally, that would apply to the interconnectors for energy coming from the continent. Electricity arriving from the proposed Tarchon Energy interconnector would be DC, so we would not need a massive DC-to-AC converter at Ardley in my constituency; we could have just one DC-to-AC converter at the point at which the electricity needs to be converted to AC much nearer London—at Tilbury or even the Isle of Grain.

It is clear that HVDC is right for many parts of the United Kingdom, not just East Anglia. Wind power stations are increasingly located along the coast or just off our coastline, and a DC transmission network would reflect that. Converting power to AC at landfall is inefficient and duplicative. A properly designed onshore and offshore HVDC network would reduce the infrastructure needed, cut down on converter stations and enable us to focus on building for real demand, rather than just peak production.

Globally, HVDC is becoming the standard for modern energy networks. By investing in HVDC now, the UK can maintain its leadership in renewable energy, create jobs and develop skills that will keep us competitive. The alternative is clinging to outdated, mid-20th century technology that will leave us falling behind other countries. Germany will not give up HVDC undergrounding altogether, but that is the presumption in our planning system, which I suggest the Government need to revise.

The Government must show decisive leadership and embrace an HVDC future. This is about more than just reducing costs and avoiding delays; it is about ensuring we meet our renewable energy goals in a way that works for communities, the environment, the economy and the planet.

9.53 am

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. This debate is an opportunity to discuss how to upgrade the grid in the best way possible, because currently, as the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said, the rules do not work. Despite the fact that we are one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, and the most depleted in the G7, our planning system does not take nature into account.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's acknowledgment that the previous Government did not adequately reform the energy system. I am also struck by the fact that he mentioned the 1989 Act. He has been in the House since 1992, when all the Government Members in the Chamber, with the exception of myself, were in school. I have been an ardent monitor of this House and energy

[Ms Polly Billington]

policy more widely, and I have not seen him quite so enthusiastic about energy market reform until now, so I am somewhat sceptical about his conversion to the idea that we need to change our planning system. I am here to change the rules, and I am glad that he is, but we need to agree on exactly how to do that. We need to preserve our nature, while increasing our efforts to restore it.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Does the hon. Lady acknowledge it was the previous Government who commissioned the Banner report on streamlining the system? Let us approach this on a bipartisan basis—we are all on the same side, trying to achieve the great upgrade of our electricity grid—and stop scoring party political points, shall we?

Ms Billington: I am perfectly happy to acknowledge when the Opposition are right and I am afraid to say that on this one they are not. We need to preserve the nature we have, while increasing efforts to restore nature. To restore nature by 2030 by 30% is one of our manifesto commitments, and that has to be taken into account with planning and national infrastructure projects. We will not reach our ambitious climate targets without it. I am disappointed there was no reference to the impact of this kind of infrastructure on nature by the hon. Gentleman. Reaching our targets will require a strong land use framework that intersects with an energy special plan, to which we have committed, and an updated national planning policy framework. I am delighted that the Government are currently working on all three of these documents and I look forward to seeing more detail on them.

It was interesting to hear the hon. Gentleman refer to the importance of public consent and support. For anyone who is aware of my work before I came to Parliament, public consent and support are absolutely vital for us to be able to undertake the transformation that we are discussing. That also involves benefit for communities, and ownership and accountability for those communities, in the form of local energy projects to help us build a more resilient grid.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): As a former Energy Minister and therefore someone who has been involved in strategic energy policy, including introducing, through the Energy Act 2013, the capacity market—still a critical part of what is used to determine from where we get our energy—and through my long experience in this House, although not as long as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), I say that public support for these things, linked to public benefit, is often an illusion. I have seen many developers, not just on energy projects, who have promised great public benefits and then they disappear like dandelion seeds on the wind.

Ms Billington: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is unusual that we agree—it is certainly the first time, although perhaps not the last—that developers end up having far too much say in these things and that the community does not have enough. I agree that we need to talk about how we change that.

An important part of the assessment by NESO and by the Government is that 8 GW of energy could be generated by local and community projects, reducing

the need for further strengthening of the grid and enabling smart, local, flexible energy. That would increase our resilience and, if we stop the idea of developers simply trying to buy off local communities with either compensation or spurious benefits, instead having proper, locally owned energy projects, would build public consent and support. Putting energy closer to where it is used will alleviate stress on the grid and help to handle bottlenecks. It is crucial to point out that that needs to be done as well as grid upgrades.

The idea that grid upgrades will not happen is wrong. GB Energy is crucial in helping to develop those projects across the country. I note that Opposition Members voted against GB Energy. I would be interested to know how they think we are going to be able to achieve our goals without it, especially when the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) mentions the vagaries of private developers and their ability to bulldoze local communities.

Locally led energy is going to be crucial, and GB Energy will be able to do that, embracing a locally led approach to building grid infrastructure. By integrating a focus on local place-based energy projects, we can build the grid we need by working with local authorities and communities across the country.

A locally led approach is crucial for building consent among communities, whose members want to see infrastructure built—the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex mentioned that—but want to be included in how it is built. That is why the rules need to be changed. I am pleased to see that there is at least consensus on that. If we are talking about the risks of damage to the environment as well as public consent and support, we need to be aware that a significant amount of undergrounding is more damaging for our climate goals and for protecting nature than some of the proposals on pylons.

This is not a debate about if we upgrade the grid; it is a debate about how we build it. I am assured that the Government will hear my representations on combining our ambitions on a clean energy superpower with restoring nature by 2030.

9.59 am

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I and many Conservatives hope and aspire for a clean energy future, but I wish to make three points that the Government and the House should consider when contemplating the upgrade of our electricity grid.

First, similar to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), are we basing our decisions on the expedient technology of today or on the ideal technology of the future? High voltage direct current is increasingly used around the world. It means only six cables instead of 18, and there are no heat issues, which means they can be closely spaced. Many other countries favour this approach over pylons and, here in the UK, National Grid itself has favoured it in Lincolnshire, concluding that it is cheaper, quicker and less risky than overhead lines. Relying on old-fashioned technology is increasingly a fool's errand. We see it in defence, social policy and now in energy.

Secondly, can we allow for a moment the notion that preserving our national heritage is a fundamental part of meeting our net zero commitments? After all, we do that in other parts of policy. We demand—sorry, I have lost my place. Can I take a moment?

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I call Emma Foody.

10.1 am

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this important debate, which matters a great deal in his constituency and mine. Although there may be disagreements on how we make the improvements, it is great to hear commitment from all sides. As we pursue ambitious goals to decarbonise our economy and expand green industries, we must confront an undeniable reality: the delivery of secure and cost-effective grid connections is not merely important, but essential.

The clean energy needs of green and decarbonising industrial clusters, particularly in regions such as the north-east, depend on reliable grid connectivity, and the problems that many face in being unable to get connections, or only with significant delays, are holding back growth. Without timely connections, we will struggle to meet the demand for renewable energy, deter inward investment and miss opportunities to utilise fully key industrial sites that could be central to our future prosperity. Grid connectivity is essential, particularly in areas poised to lead the way in offshore renewables. Power supply to port and quayside sites, which are critical for the infrastructure underpinning the growth of offshore wind energy, is essential.

The north-east has the capacity to lead the way in green, clean industry, but we are being held back due to grid connectivity and delays in projects and investment. As outlined in the Mayor of the North East's response to the national industrial strategy Green Paper, national grid connections are central to offshore wind developers. They provide much-needed certainty to private investors, manufacturers and supply chains, creating thousands of clean energy jobs. For many industries, particularly in the north-east, the costs and long waiting times for grid connections are simply too high. The current capacity is insufficient to support the renewable energy generation that we require, and the delays in securing grid connections hold back business growth and leave sites underutilised when they should be driving forward our regional economies.

Let us take Newcastle international airport as an example. With a solar farm that already supplies 100% of its terminal's electricity on sunny days, the airport generates more power than it needs. It wants to export its surplus electricity to the grid, yet it has been told that it cannot do so until next year at the earliest. It has been informed that, even then, a full connection may not be possible until 2035, which would mean a full 10 years to wait. It is an unacceptable situation. Like many businesses across the region, the airport has been forced to delay millions of pounds-worth of investment in sustainability schemes simply because it is uncertain as to when it will be able to connect to the grid. With a target of becoming carbon neutral by 2035, Newcastle international airport cannot reach that goal without access to the grid.

It is not just businesses such as the airport that are facing difficulties. Throughout the region, the barriers to grid connection are stalling industrial growth, limiting renewable energy delivery and even restricting economic activity in rural areas, where grid vulnerability remains a persistent issue. What is the solution? First, the Government's upcoming planning reforms need to be fully implemented to improve the ability to approve critical infrastructure. This is essential to accelerate the decarbonisation process and secure long-term energy stability. It is also crucial that the approval processes for grid connections are streamlined, cutting the time it takes to link key industrial sites to the grid. Secondly, we must have better co-ordination between the national grid, the Crown Estate, distribution network operators and the offshore wind supply chain. Co-operative working is key to ensuring that delivery is timely and effective.

In the north-east, the strategic energy board, established through the deeper devolution deal, is already addressing grid challenges at pressure points. By aligning businesses' future grid-connection needs with regional planning, we can ensure that grid reinforcement happens in the areas we need it the most, particularly at key industrial sites and renewable energy projects. Grid infrastructure must not only be viewed as a utility; it must be seen as a strategic tool for economic development. The north-east can lead the way in clean, green energy production, but we need the grid infrastructure in place to support it.

The Government can act now to ensure that our grid can support both our industrial ambitions and our green objectives, driving the growth that is rightly at the heart of the Government's agenda. This is not just about providing power: it is about jobs, investment and the future prosperity of our regions. By working together and prioritising the needs of the grid, we can accelerate the transition to a cleaner, more sustainable energy system, boost growth, unlock the potential of our industries and provide the jobs of the future.

10.6 am

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and to speak in this debate. I am going to speak about five things: the environment, efficiency, energy, economics and ergonomics.

I will start by talking about the environment, because this debate is clearly couched in a critical and shared understanding that the environment matters. But what is the environment? At a philosophical level the environment is, in a sense, our connection with reality. It is our link to the natural world through the experience and character of the places we live, and the places we live matter because they inspire us or disappoint us; they encourage us or leave us wanting.

Everyone deserves their chance to experience beauty. I make no apology for making the case for beauty; I have done so many times as a Minister, shadow Minister and Back Bencher. Everyone deserves their chance to experience beauty because, as Keats understood, beauty and goodness are inseparable. Beauty and truth are indelibly imprinted one upon the other. So when we speak about the pylons, let us speak about the effect they have on the places in which people live.

In Lincolnshire, particularly in my constituency, a row of huge pylons as big as Nelson's column in a flat landscape will have a devastating effect on the vistas

[*Sir John Hayes*]

and views of not just the people who live in their immediate proximity but people from miles away. We will see those structures across the flat fens for 5, 10 or perhaps even 15 miles, which is unacceptable. It is an imposition on a flat landscape that historically has never enjoyed tall structures, with the exception of the churches, and they were built to the glory of God. The pylons certainly are not that, and I do not think even the Minister would defend them on that basis—their holiness, that is. So when we think of this immense row of pylons stretching down the east coast, let us understand their connection to the day-to-day environment and the things that affect people's local sense of wellbeing. I hope the Minister will recognise that, for that reason, the more we can mitigate their effect, the better.

Patrick Spencer: May I put on the record my apologies for fluffing my speech a moment ago? One of the points I wanted to make is that we take into account our natural environment when we look at housing and planning policy. The reality is that when we want to build a development on the side of a village, put an extension on a house or expand our housing stock, planning authorities demand that we take into account the natural environment. That importantly includes the aesthetic, which we talk about a lot, as well as the preservation of our landscapes.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. This is an intervention, not another speech.

Patrick Spencer: If the Government choose to solve the housing crisis by taking into account our environment, why can we not do that with energy policy as well?

Sir John Hayes: We can and do. Contrary to what was said earlier, the existing planning policy does take into account the effect on the environment. That is why, for example, we do not build unsuitable things in areas of outstanding natural beauty. That is also why sites of special scientific interest matter in the planning system, as we mitigate what we can do by them, in them and near them. By the way, these pylons will run alongside one of the most precious natural environments in our country: the salt marshes that run along my constituency. They are a site of outstanding importance because of the bird life they sustain, which makes them a unique environment.

Let us be clear about the need to mitigate all else in the pursuit of maintaining those things that are already embedded in our planning system as highly significant, such as those of the kind suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer) in his pithy and powerful intervention.

Ms Billington: Salt marshes are very much a unique environment. Does the right hon. Gentleman have concerns about the possibility of trenching through salt marshes as opposed to using pylons, which actually have less impact on the environment, particularly given the climate sink value of salt marshes? Would he concede that there might be a need for us to reconsider the way in which we tackle fragile environments such as salt marshes, rather than simply trenching them, which has done long-term damage?

Sir John Hayes: That is a good point, and it is why Lincolnshire county council's submission to National Grid specifically takes into account the trenching problem that the hon. Lady raised. It suggests an offshore grid, but obviously one that avoids the damage she mentioned. I recommend that she studies that submission—it is in the public domain—to see how we can offshore that grid without damaging the salt marshes in the way she suggests.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) made the relevant point that there are balancing factors. First, once cables are undergrounded, they are maintenance free, but pylons require constant maintenance, which therefore adds to their carbon footprint. Everybody has seen that. Secondly, salt marshes are very often Ramsar sites and migration bird sites, and we do not want overhead power lines interfering with the migration of birds. We often see that scores of swans have been killed on power lines because they are not very good at navigating around these things.

Sir John Hayes: With the insight for which he is known, my hon. Friend has anticipated two of the points that I was going to make. The problem with pylons being so close to SSSIs is that the birds do not know boundaries. Of course, the salt marsh in Lincolnshire matters because, exactly as my hon. Friend said, it is important as a site for geese and duck in particular. To run the pylons so close to that is at best highly contentious and at worse wholly destructive. The offshore grid that my hon. Friend describes can be run further out to sea, which is what we do with cables routinely. If we were able to see the ocean bed around our islands, we would see any number of trunked cables that run through them, which provide vital power and communications infrastructure.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): There is an interesting discussion about the balance of trade-offs. One of the other considerations is cost, and the cost of undergrounding is multiple times the amount of overhead pylons. The previous Government were not able to demonstrate that they could do it at the same cost, so how does the right hon. Gentleman balance that factor? Does he not think that his constituents, and constituents throughout the country, might consider the loading of those costs on to them unacceptable?

Sir John Hayes: There is a big argument to be had about costs because we are planning a project that will last decades—perhaps even longer. When I was the Energy Minister, I was very conscious of the fact that we might be making 100-year decisions. It is very hard to gauge costs over time because of two things. First, there are the ongoing maintenance costs associated with any line that runs above ground, and given the changing climate, it is likely that extreme weather events will become more frequent, and extreme weather events will have an effect on anything above ground. Secondly, the relative costs of underground and overhead cables vary according to the kind of cable laid, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said; and indeed some of the evidence from other places in Europe and elsewhere suggests that the cost of trunking cables underground is falling, whereas there is no similar reduction in the cost of overhead cables, which, on pylons, have been at the same cost for a very long time indeed.

The final point is about consent. The longer these things take, the more they cost. Certainly in Lincolnshire—and I imagine this is true in Essex, Suffolk and other places—there will be protracted legal challenges to the pylons, whereas, with local support and the support of local authorities like Lincolnshire county council, undergrounding would be a much more straightforward affair. Factoring in those costs is complex, but it needs to happen.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Very briefly, the ESO review of the east of England network demonstrated that there is a higher up-front cost for undergrounding of an extra £1 billion from Norwich to Tilbury, but in the longer term it saves money. It is just not correct to say that undergrounding is automatically much more expensive. That is a departmental mantra that is now discredited—just read the ESO and NESO documents.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Before the right hon. Gentleman responds to that intervention—he is being very generous in giving way—can I just say that we have to move on to the Front-Bench speakers at 10.30 am and there are many people who wish to participate? I have not imposed time limits; all I am saying is that there are 13 minutes left and probably seven people who want to speak.

Sir John Hayes: On that basis, Sir Christopher, I will not give way again, for as you have noted, I have been immensely generous. I will abbreviate my remarks without missing out any of the other four subjects that I promised to speak about. Let me deal with them very rapidly. Efficiency is critically important in delivering energy policy. As I have already said, if we want to get that policy pursued and delivered quickly, we need an approach that avoids the protracted debates and disputes I have described.

Let us speak more strategically about energy policy, on which the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) made a powerful point; we need to understand that bringing supply closer to demand is vital at a strategic level. Successive Governments have failed at this. A lot of people have made comments about the previous Government—the previous Government would have done a lot better if they had listened to me more often. I hope this one will; then they will not go wrong. It is important to reconsider the relationship between supply and demand. No Government have done that with sufficient vigour, and I hope this one will.

On economics, putting in the pylons will also have a displacement effect, because Lincolnshire is perhaps the most important county of all in respect of food production. I understand that about 30% of the fresh produce we consume goes through my constituency. South Lincolnshire produces 20% of the vegetables we consume, 20% of the sugar beet, and so on. The displacement effect of energy infrastructure, including pylons and solar, will have a devastating effect on food production and therefore food security. I simply say to the Minister that energy security must not be made the enemy of food security, and vice versa. That is why the economics are more complex than they perhaps first appear.

Finally, on the cognitive ergonomics of Government, it is really important that in winding up, the Minister assures this Chamber that the Departments across Government are working closely together. We have

talked about land use studies, and that is a good thing, but given the commitments that the Planning Minister has made to beauty and the commitments that the Environment Secretary has made to food production and security, it is important that we do not simply pursue a policy that is invidious because it contradicts the other priorities of Government. In my long experience as a Minister in a variety of Departments, I have found that lateral thinking in Government is a rare and precious thing; I simply recommend to the Minister a more lateral approach in combining those critical priorities.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex is right: we need to approach this in a bolder than partisan way, because we are speaking about fundamental decisions in the interest of our country. This is a matter of national interest, but it does not have to be a matter of national interest that compromises the common good.

10.20 am

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): I will speak briefly because I know that many of my colleagues also wish to speak.

I echo the comments made by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin). This does not have to be a partisan issue, but equally we have to acknowledge the situation as we find it, not the fantasy that we wish it to be. The reality is that we have had 14 years in which decisions could have been made.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Here we go.

Jack Abbott: The hon. Gentleman says, “Here we go”, but it is absolutely relevant to this debate. Yes, the Conservative Government passed the Banner report—well done. That is the big achievement of the last 14 years. There was a fundamental opportunity over the last decade to recognise where we were going as a country, and what we needed to do. Those decisions were consistently kicked down the line, and now we are here.

The window in which we have to operate is incredibly narrow. We essentially have five years to meet the transition, which we have to do. Yes, underground cabling will cost more, but also there is a significant time delay, too. It is not a 2030 timeframe; it is a 2034 one. Let us get over the fantasy of a magical offshore grid connection that will solve everything way more cheaply and quickly. It just does not exist. We have to be honest with people.

There will always be opposition to any development. I grew up in Suffolk; I know that there will be opposition to the grid upgrades. There is also opposition to solar farms in the west of the county. Obviously, there is opposition to Sizewell C and things like it, but that cannot get in the way of progress. There is also the Green party bingo card—opposing all the projects; well, we definitely cannot go down that route either.

This is about opportunity. There is an opportunity to say that we will be transitioning to renewable energy to fulfil our mission and the guarantee that we made to working people at the election. It is our chance to seize the opportunity for greater energy independence, and for us—including my home county of Suffolk—to seize the opportunity to be world leaders in the energy transition. We cannot keep going around the houses, dithering, delaying and pretending that this stuff will not happen. It might sound good to constituents back home, but I grew up in that area—

Patrick Spencer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jack Abbott: I will finish my point because it is directly related to the hon. Gentleman's constituency of Central Suffolk. We already have pylons running through that part of the world. We have Mendlesham mast, which can be seen from miles around. We also have Eye airfield, big business parks, warehouses and farm buildings. We already have infrastructure in place.

Sir John Hayes: We already have horror; let us have more.

Jack Abbott: It is not horror at all; it is infrastructure that people desperately rely on. The right hon. Gentleman might want to live in a fantasy in which costs do not matter and there are no trade-offs. Well, that is not the case.

I also say to the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex: East Anglia and the fenlands, which he mentioned, are critical, because if we do not build the energy transition infrastructure that we need, guess what? There is no landscape. We will be surveying everything from a boat. That is the reality.

Patrick Spencer: The hon. Gentleman talks about speed and the need to do the transition quickly. May I draw his attention to the work of Bent Flyvbjerg? He wrote a book last year called "How Big Things Get Done", in which he noted, having looked at infrastructure projects across the world, that less than one in 10 are delivered on time and on budget. Part of the problem is making bad decisions in the planning process and not making the right decisions. If we want to get things done, we should take our time now and get the planning right.

Jack Abbott: The hon. Gentleman has just made a case for why we must crack on, and stop dithering and delaying. There is a history of doing bad things slowly, and that should never be repeated. It is not an excuse to do nothing now. We cannot afford to keep kicking the can down the road. We cannot keep relying on our constituents to foot the bill for an inefficient, unstable energy system—which is exactly what we have inherited. We can be as bipartisan as we like, but we have to accept the reality. We cannot keep heaping costs on to our constituents and businesses for our failure to invest properly in the system, which we now have five years to do.

To conclude—I am conscious that I want to bring my colleagues in—this debate has illustrated the choice we face between two competing visions for the future. We can choose whether or not we are prepared to stand up for Britain's energy security; we can choose whether or not we are prepared to throw away billions of pounds in taxpayers' money on fantasies that will never come to pass, or act now to slash bills; and we must choose whether or not we are prepared to destroy vast swathes of land, which underground cabling would do, and commit lasting ecological damage. I know which I would prefer, and which my constituents prefer, and I am unapologetic about choosing opportunity over wasteful fantasy projects.

10.25 am

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I welcome the chance to discuss matters like this in Westminster Hall—where, in my experience, there is an opportunity

to look at the issues and options calmly and without party political point scoring. We must deliver the energy transition at speed, and with community inclusion. The upgrades to the electricity grid are vital for net zero, but how this is done will shape public trust. We can, and must, achieve rapid progress and meaningful community engagement.

My constituents in Waveney Valley—like much of East Anglia—face floods, droughts, and farmland at risk of submersion: they understand the urgency, and voted for action in the election. The grid upgrade is essential to connect renewable energy capacity and end reliance on fossil fuels. Indeed, I have spent the last 10 years leading national environmental charities advocating for and advancing renewable energy, speeding up the transition, and advocating for strengthening the grid. The question is how we can best do that.

There are significant concerns over this proposed pylon route, as we have heard—concerns about the impact on sensitive nature and heritage sites, including the rural landscape, about the impact on farming, and about the implications for local traffic. This is not just about convenience. We need to make decisions that are right for the long term and resilient to the future climate changes that we face.

I want to zoom out, as other speakers have done, and talk about the overall climate emergency and climate breakdown that we are grappling with and working to address. We have seen in Parliament over recent decades a broad consensus on the need for action to be taken: the Climate Change Act 2008 was passed with cross-party support, and the 2050 net zero target was embedded by a later Government, with broad support across the House. We have not had the kind of polarisation that we have seen in the US, and we need to maintain that strong support and to avoid the issue being weaponised so that it becomes divisive and is used for political point scoring, but we risk that happening if we do not take people with us and if people are not heard.

The energy transition must be done with communities, not to them—communities need to feel engaged and heard to maintain their support. People want to see action taken. Speed and proper community consultation can go hand in hand; indeed, they must. The best way to accelerate the energy transition is for communities to feel consulted and involved from the outset. If people believe projects are imposed on them without proper engagement, there is a risk of slowing progress and undermining trust in the renewable energy revolution—a revolution that must happen.

That is why I want to see us use the time that we have right now. The National Grid consultation closed in July and we face a long delay until a planning application is expected at some point next year—we are not sure when. During this time, other options can be properly considered, and that is all I am calling for: a proper consideration of all the options. National Grid has acknowledged that undergrounding is possible—it is doing it in two small sections of the route—but there remain significant concerns.

Jack Abbott: Will the hon. Member give way? That is an important point.

Adrian Ramsay: As the hon. Member knows, we are about to move on to the Front-Bench spokespeople, so I would like to finish my points. These issues need to be

properly considered and the alternatives must be properly examined, including undergrounding more or all of the route, as we have heard, or an offshore grid. Such things are being done in other countries. Indeed, a 2020 National Grid study indicated that an integrated offshore approach could be more cost-effective than piecemeal alternatives. That is why all the options need to be properly considered, and why constituents need to be listened to. People are saying that they feel let down. One of my constituents said:

“So far, we have been subjected to a series of lies, called NIMBYs, and told our rural area is unimportant.”

Another said that there is a failure

“to engage with the local community and...to prove the pylons are better than other more sensible alternatives”.

They want the Government to start listening.

The rapid deployment of renewables must happen. The principle is clear: decisions about infrastructure must be made with communities, and we must maintain and build public trust. All connectivity options must be properly assessed. My constituents are keen to support the energy transition, but they need respect and consultation, and to be shown that the impacts are being properly considered and any compensation packages are clearly set out. The energy transition is not a choice between speed and community support. With thoughtful planning and meaningful engagement, we can, and must, achieve both.

10.31 am

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I commend the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing this debate, and I thank all of those attending—it is good to see representation from most parties.

Let me start with the good news that there is considerable consensus in the room, despite a couple of testy exchanges. Members from across the House have agreed that decarbonising our electricity generation is critical to meeting the UK's contribution to tackling global climate change. A less centralised and more distributed electricity network is also essential for economic growth, and to ensure that our various businesses and homes continue to have power.

The hon. Members for East Thanet (Ms Billington), for Ipswich (Jack Abbott), for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody), and for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay), as well as the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex, have all articulated the decarbonisation challenge very well. Members have also agreed on the need for a planning system that strikes the right balance between national needs and local voices. That recurring challenge comes up in so many debates in the House, and I will say more about it shortly.

It is welcome that the new Labour Government have committed to delivering

“the largest upgrade to our national clean energy infrastructure in a generation.”

It is in all our interests that they succeed, particularly, as the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex conceded, in the context of the previous Conservative Government not acting with anything close to the speed or ambition that the challenge demands. But as we have seen with past goals, such as the previous Government's original

goal to end the sale of full combustion engine cars by 2030, aspirations will remain lofty ideas without a solid plan to achieve them. In that context, around 40% of projects face a connection wait of at least a year, according to National Grid's figures. Indeed, according to *Electrical Review*, 75% of energy sector experts identified timely grid connections as the principal obstacle impeding the growth of renewable energy in the UK.

It is therefore essential that the Government show the leadership that is needed not just to upgrade our electricity grid, enabling its decarbonisation and providing greater value for money for consumers, but to tackle in a sensitive and inclusive way the recurring challenge regarding the balance between listening to the voices of local communities and achieving national objectives. The hon. Member articulately highlighted the role of community consent and engagement in delivering the infrastructure that we need, although I would assert that his figures on the cost of buried versus overhead cables are somewhat disputed by a number of sources.

The Liberal Democrats also want to see the electricity grid network reformed to support businesses' transition to renewable energy sources and to permit local energy grids to supply power to communities who need it most. We support the expansion of the grid network through a strategic land and sea use framework to facilitate an optimum balance between electricity generation, food production and nature recovery. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and the hon. Member for Waveney Valley have articulated the challenge of ensuring that we balance the demands on our land and use it appropriately.

The Liberal Democrats would like to see more done on a rooftop solar revolution by expanding incentives for households to install solar panels, including a guaranteed fair price for electricity sold back into the grid. We believe that upgrades to the national grid are essential to ensure that electric vehicles are cheap to charge and are an accessible step in making everyday lives more sustainable.

Making schemes for community benefit from new infrastructure compulsory will be essential for local buy-in, and we have tabled an amendment to the Great British Energy Bill to that effect. Keeping energy bills affordable, at a time when many are struggling to pay their energy costs, is important, particularly in the context of Government cuts to the winter fuel payment and the forthcoming 1.2% increase to the energy price cap. The Labour Government need to take more radical action to ensure that consumer energy bills remain affordable.

As several Members have said, consent and dialogue are essential. I particularly applaud the observation from the hon. Member for Waveney Valley that consultation needs to be more than just a technical process. It is important to build trust and dialogue so that people believe in the process.

I face some of these challenges in my Didcot and Wantage constituency in Oxfordshire, where Thames Water proposes to build the second largest reservoir, claiming that studies suggest that it is needed to meet long-term water demand. A key challenge is that my constituents simply do not trust Thames Water's motives and its ability to deliver such a large scheme. That is a strong illustration of the challenge of balancing national goals and local concerns.

[Olly Glover]

I do not have the answer to how we strike the right balance, but it is something that we all need to think about, and particularly the new Government. I call on them not to think that their unassailable majority in terms of seats in this place gives them the power to override those concerns. Perhaps they should think more in terms of vote share, and they should recognise that many people did not buy into this Government. It is therefore important to have dialogue and to find the right balance in the planning process between national and local goals.

My constituency has seen huge population growth in recent years, with more than 4,000 further homes planned for Valley Park near Didcot. The science and technology sector has a major presence at Milton Park, Culham and Harwell campus. Harwell campus has a major current and future demand for electricity to power globally important synchrotron and neutron beam equipment and spin-off businesses. In that context, confidence is needed that future affordable energy supply will happen.

If the electricity grid is upgraded, local and community energy projects can provide even more help. Community-owned projects can help with the challenge of getting local buy-in, and may have a return on investment and businesses in local areas. Flexibility in local energy systems can allow local energy trading, meaning energy pricing at lower than market rates, allowing more money in bill payers' pockets and reduced overheads for businesses.

I am pleased to see many examples of solar panel roof schemes in my constituency, but would like more, particularly on new houses. Thames Travel, Didcot Girls' school, Chiltern primary school, Hagbourne school, Fir Tree junior school in Wallingford and Malcolm Building at Ashurst Court in Sandford have all invested in solar panel roof schemes. Just outside my constituency, in Oxford West and Abingdon, the Sandford lock hydroelectric plant uses Archimedes screws to generate electricity from the flow of the river, generating clean renewable power for local community benefit. We need more such projects. I call on the Government to create the electricity grid and wider regulatory framework to empower our local communities to benefit.

The key challenge we face is a national one—the balance between national goals and hearing local concerns and getting local buy-in. Dialogue, and ensuring that things are done with, not to, communities, is essential. I hope that the Government will not let their majority go to their head, but will engage in the challenge of getting an effective, consenting planning process.

10.38 am

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. It has been a pleasure, as a shadow energy Minister and a constituency MP with similar issues, to have discussed these issues to try to find a way through. It has also been a pleasure to share notes on the experiences of the communities that we both represent—indeed, there are many such communities represented by Members in this room and beyond.

It is good to see so many people attending this debate. It shows the groundswell of feeling outside this Chamber on what we need to do, whether that is on upgrading the grid and making our way to our net zero, cleaner future—everybody in this room acknowledges that we need to upgrade the grid in order to do that—or in representing communities who are concerned about the pace and direction of travel, and the inability, or refusal, of those in positions of power to consider alternative technologies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Bowie: As ever, I am delighted to give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member. He said that all parts of the United Kingdom are keen to achieve and be part of this goal. Renewable energy in Northern Ireland makes up 50% of the electricity generated, but it has to reach 80% by 2030, as I know he is aware. That is six years away. When it comes to scale, pace and complexity, does he agree that there is a need for the whole of the UK to have additional support and funding to reach these goals? That means Northern Ireland needs to be part of this process as well.

Andrew Bowie: The hon. Gentleman knows well, I hope, that my commitment to our entire United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is just as firm as his, and when I speak about the UK, I reference Strangford and Northern Ireland more widely. The situation in Northern Ireland is unique in that the number of homes that are off-grid far outweighs the number of off-grid homes in mainland GB. That brings its own complexities with regard to decarbonisation, moving away from gas or oil, and boilers for heating and other such purposes. I completely understand the unique complexities of decarbonising in a Northern Irish environment, and he is absolutely right that when the Government take decisions on UK-wide infrastructure projects, they should be cognisant of Northern Ireland's unique situation, being in an all-Ireland grid and having so many off-grid properties. That should never be far from our minds.

I thank the hon. Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington), my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer), the hon. Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody), my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), as ever, and the hon. Members for Ipswich (Jack Abbott) and for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) for their contributions. I did not agree with all of them, but they were all very thought through. I know that everybody in this room, whatever their perspective on how we achieve a cleaner future, agrees that upgrading the grid is important. How we go about that is the issue concerning us today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex eloquently highlighted the strength of feeling among communities across the country being asked to take on the burden of what is being proposed. I mentioned that we shared notes, and that is because my constituency, like that of my hon. Friend, faces the threat of huge energy infrastructure bills over the next few years. Communities fear the genuine threat of industrialisation sweeping rural landscapes and the impact on communities as a result.

In my West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine constituency, the energy industry is omnipresent. It is home to the subsea capital of Europe and on the edge of the oil and gas capital of Europe. Many of my constituents work, or have worked, in the energy industry. Many are involved in the design, construction or installation of underground or offshore pipelines for oil, gas or electric cables. If someone digs deep enough in my constituency, they will find national gas pipelines buried underground. The only indication of them being there are the little yellow marker signs on the surface warning people to beware and not to dig anywhere close.

I say that because I stress that my constituents and so many others around the country who are raising this issue are not doing so because they are being needlessly obstructive. They are not doing it because they are being anti-net zero, or because they do not agree the grid needs to be upgraded. They just know, due to their experience working in the industry, that there are other ways forward. It is for this reason, and the overwhelming desire on the Conservative side of the House to exhaust all the options in our pursuit to find the best technology at the best cost that would deliver our decarbonised grid—and not, as the National Energy System Operator report suggested, that we favour pace over perfection—and to do so in a way that does not blight so many communities and our great British countryside, that we committed in our manifesto to take a different approach.

Tom Hayes: We have heard in this debate about the importance of expediency. Does he agree that, uniquely, we live in a world in turmoil? We see growing international threats, and one of the surest ways in which Britain can protect ourselves against them is by being energy independent. As a consequence, we need not just to move quickly to meet our climate crisis—our energy defences are down, and it is important that we can protect ourselves in the future.

Andrew Bowie: I could not agree more. Indeed, I long for a day when we are much more energy independent. That is why I take such issue with Labour's position on the North sea and the wilful destruction of our oil and gas industry, leaving us open to further outside influence and reliant on hostile states. That is one of the reasons why I think that we need to increase our energy security, and why I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to improve it.

This is not about whether we do that; it is about how we go about it and about taking decisions now in the best long-term interests of people and of the energy security of this country. I do not believe that the way that the Government are proceeding at the minute is in the best long-term interests of the communities of this country. If we get this right, work together, get to a solution where communities feel they have a stake in the energy transition, deliver the clean future and become energy independent, as I used to say when I was the Minister, that is a win, win, win—but we are a long way from that just yet.

I mentioned community benefits briefly. In June 2023, I visited East Anglia to begin the consultation process on the community benefits package. On 7 December 2023, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer outlined the framework of that package. I wonder whether the Minister present might be able to give us an update as to where the process is and where the Government have reached on community benefits—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): That was almost a year ago.

Andrew Bowie: Quite. Regardless of the technologies that are selected, of whether the pylons and associated infrastructure are built and of any right hon. or hon. Member's view, communities out there want to know what the community benefits package and the trade-offs will be, and what they will receive as a result of having to host infrastructure in the national interest. An update on that would be delightful.

Ms Billington: I am struck that we have heard a lot about community engagement and consultation, but what does not seem to be clear is exactly what is meant by it, despite the fact that all of us do a lot of community consultation and engagement through the process of democracy. In particular, given how people talk about it, we could quite well end up with a veto by a small number of people of a transformation of our country to increase resilience, reduce costs and tackle the climate crisis. Surely the hon. Gentleman would agree that that is not desirable. That is why we need to change the planning process, so that we can support the transformation we seek.

Andrew Bowie: I respect the hon. Lady's position and welcome her intervention, but it would be reprehensible if hon. Members elected to this House to represent their communities did not do so. For her, it might just be a small number of people complaining about this, but for many Members of this House and representatives in other legislatures across the United Kingdom, huge numbers of people in communities that they represent are very concerned about the impacts that the plans will have on their landscape, their land, their house prices and so on. It is incumbent on us, as the elected representatives of those people, to bring those concerns to the House to debate and discuss, and for a decision then to be taken by the Government. Whether we like it or not, a decision will be taken by the Government about the best way forward, which is why I asked about community benefits.

The consultation that I mentioned a minute ago was focused specifically on the community benefits package, and I asked whether we might see more detail on it in the near future, and whether it might be statutory—I know that that was something being looked at by the Department, but it has been looking at it for some time.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bowie: I have little time, but I will.

Deirdre Costigan: The hon. Gentleman mentioned protecting landscapes. Does he agree that it is rather audacious for those in his party to refer to that, given that after 14 years they have left us with nature targets that they failed to achieve, still drilling for oil and gas, with backing for fracking for a significant amount of time, sewage in our rivers and seas, and plastic bottles across the country because they refused to implement environmental schemes on that front? Does he agree that he has a cheek to mention protecting the landscape? Furthermore, does he agree that many of his arguments today are a delaying tactic? We need that power in west London.

Andrew Bowie: No, I do not agree.

Before I conclude, I will say this. Noticeable today and in discussions on this subject in the recent past, is a certain tone that is being adopted by some Labour Members. While we might disagree about the ways to reach net zero and to best upgrade the grid, there are people out there who are genuinely worried about what these plans might mean for them and their communities. I urge all hon. and right hon. Members to please engage in this debate with an element of respect for the views expressed on behalf of those people and communities up and down the country.

I know that the Minister recognises this. Indeed, he has always engaged in this debate with due respect for those communities. There are people out there concerned about the way forward and the pace at which this change is coming. Please remember those people, consider other options, and listen to those communities. We can then bring the country together, and everybody can contribute to this transition, which we all agree needs to happen in the national interest.

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): It is a pleasure, Sir Christopher, to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for introducing the debate, for his approach, and for the engagement we have had on the topic in the short time that I have been in this job. While I suspect we might disagree politically on a great many things, his repeated commitment to the need for net zero is important, and separates him from some hon. Members who might make the issue of grid updates part of an excuse to avoid dealing with the climate issue. I welcome that, and I was pleased to meet him and his colleagues recently to discuss the matter.

I also thank all others who have contributed to the debate. I welcome the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) to his new role. He is not just a shadow Energy Minister now, but shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. Clearly, he did not have enough on his plate before. I do not know what it says about the Scottish group of Conservative MPs that he has two jobs, but I will leave that to one side. The debate this morning has been wide-ranging, although I confess I did not anticipate an existential question from the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) about the nature of beauty and the environment. I learned a lot from that, but I will leave the theological debate about pylons to others in the House.

I want to pick up on the general context first, and then some of the specific issues that have been raised. When it comes to the security of our energy future, few matters face us as a Government more important than the delivery of network infrastructure. It was the topic of the very first meeting I had as a Minister, and has been the topic of almost every other meeting I have had in this job, with a range of different people looking at it. Our network infrastructure is in dire need of upgrading.

I will start with the point that the shadow Minister finished on. I recognise that the impact of delivering these upgrades, while important to our national infrastructure, will be felt in individual communities;

that is the nature of this. I recognise that there will be communities across Great Britain and Northern Ireland that will have to host energy infrastructure. We thank them for doing so and, while recognising the importance of upgrading infrastructure for the whole country, also recognise the need to get the balance right.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is always incredibly helpful with questions that I or anybody asks, which I appreciate and thank him for. For Northern Ireland to be successful, it needs support from Government here. The shadow Minister reiterated that. I ask the Minister to say something perhaps similar for the record, so that it is in *Hansard*. We in Northern Ireland need to be very much part of the strategy for the future. As others have said, it is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are always better together, but there are advantages—let us see some of those advantages.

Michael Shanks: While I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, me repeating “better together” is sometimes tricky in my political party. I do, however, reiterate my commitment to the whole of the United Kingdom. He will know that I take that very seriously, and I have had a number of meetings on the topic with the Economy Minister in Northern Ireland, who is responsible for energy. Clearly, the role I have is different in Northern Ireland, given the transferred nature of energy policy and the whole island grid, but I take the issues very seriously and commit to that today.

The delivery of a reinforced modern electricity network is critical for every home and business across the country. It is a critical enabler for our Clean Power 2030 mission, which is designed to deliver not just energy security but economic growth, skilled jobs and cheaper energy, which the country so desperately needs. In short, transforming the network underpins our shared commitment to energy security, prosperity and the low-carbon future that the country needs. It is fair to say that this transformation is extremely long overdue. The last significant modernisation of the grid took place in the 1960s. New investment into industries of the future, such as data centres, will play such an important part in the economy of the next few decades. We need to deliver jobs around that, unlocking growth, but electricity demands will increase by an expected 60% by 2035 and double by 2050.

Deirdre Costigan: I want to bring the Minister's attention to issues being faced in west London. He mentioned data centres; we recently had confirmation of a great investment from CyrusOne, but it has to get power from Enfield because there are huge constraints on the energy system in west London. Does the Minister agree that we need to ramp up the work on connecting these new investments to the grid? We must not allow the tactics of the Opposition, which are about delay and going back 14 years to decisions they should have made but never did. Now is the time to take action; people should not be required to pay higher energy fees than they should, which is another aspect of this issue.

Michael Shanks: I agree with my hon. Friend on that important point. Connection dates on both the generation and demand sides are much too far in the future. We need to build more of the network structure across the country and reform the way we deal with connections, which is ongoing.

I am conscious of time and want to give the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex time to respond. We have heard from a number of hon. Members about the impact of grid expansions on their communities. I want to make three key points. First, I do not accept that grid expansion is riding roughshod over communities. Communities will have a say in these projects. Secondly, I take a less dismissive view than some hon. Members about the importance of genuine community benefits. If communities host infrastructure and generation, they should benefit. The shadow Minister referred to work under way, which he said the previous Government spent a year on and we have moved on in five months. We are moving quickly to work out what effective community benefit looks like. We are developing guidance on that, particularly for hosting transmission network infrastructure, which will be published in due course.

On the point about modern technology, delivery of the network is underpinned by the latest technology, tailoring it to locations that urgently need reinforcement. It relies on upgrading existing power lines first, and uses innovative strategic design and options to find solutions that balance ecological impacts and, crucially, cost. That is important, given that the cost is borne by billpayers across the country.

Hon. Members will be under no illusion that we have to expand the network considerably, rewiring and connecting to new areas of demand in future. That is why we have outlined our mission of clean power by 2030. We will publish our response to NESO's report soon. The mission will be achieved by investment in renewable generation, including onshore and offshore wind, solar and storage. There can be no transition to that clean power future without the grid upgrade.

That work will take us to 2030 but, given the increase in demand to 2050, it will have to continue far beyond that.

I want to pick up a point about NESO's advice on cost. NESO's advice on the project in East Anglia concerns whether it will be cheaper or more expensive. A number of hon. Members should review that advice more carefully. I would have gone into more detail but I have only 40 seconds to wrap up. It is worth clarifying that delays in delivering the undergrounding part were not factored into some of the points that the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex made.

To conclude a wide-ranging debate, we are on the edge of an industrial and energy revolution. We want to reduce bills and deliver energy security. To do that we need to upgrade the grid infrastructure, which must be hosted in some communities. We want to bring them with us but that work has to be done, and that is the commitment of this Government.

10.59 am

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I thank the Minister for his engagement and for the meeting he had with MPs. It would be very kind if he could write to me with the further detail that he has not been able to put on the record today. I would also point out that the only orange flag against ultrahigh voltage direct current undergrounding in the ESO review in the spring was about cable availability. It was not a red flag but an orange flag. With streamlining of the planning process, this could be sped up. It is a possibility, and I hope the Minister will continue dialogue on this issue, because I think he will need this as a solution to the problems he will run into.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Fly-tipping

11 am

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for local councils to tackle fly-tipping.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. We have only 30 minutes for this debate, and I am keen to take as many interventions as possible, so I am looking forward to hearing many contributions from across different sides of this Chamber.

Fly-tipping is a major scourge in the local areas of many constituents, not only in my constituency, but across the country. It is the illegal dumping of waste in public or private spaces, often in areas that are designated for waste disposal. As people will be aware through the news and other online sources, fly-tipping has become a significant environmental issue, with millions of pounds being spent annually on cleaning up waste and countless communities affected by the unsightly and hazardous consequences. This problem not only affects the aesthetics of the environment, but poses serious health and safety risks.

In today's debate, I hope to explore the nature of fly-tipping, its causes and consequences, and where we need further Government action. There have been regular debates on this topic in Westminster Hall over the last number of years, including recently in September. I acknowledge that all Governments have struggled with this issue and that solutions have been piecemeal, with successes but also concerns. I welcome the announcement this week of respect orders and this Government's focus on antisocial behaviour; I hope that, alongside those, this Government will focus on and challenge those who persistently fly-tip in the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward and for giving me permission to intervene when I asked him before. There is pressure on councils everywhere; is he aware that the tightening of restrictions on general waste, in order to meet recycling targets for councils, has made them more difficult to follow? In some instances, it has led to greater examples of fly-tipping. Does he agree that the Government must support local councils and streamline the process to find and deal with this issue effectively in every postcode throughout the United Kingdom?

Tristan Osborne: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. We are having this debate not only to discuss how we can better support local councils, but to acknowledge some of the successes of local authorities around the country where they have been challenging this issue, and hopefully to share that expertise. I agree that fines need to increase for those caught, and councils need to be given support from central Government to pursue that. One reason I am bringing forward this debate is that farmers and communities in rural areas in my constituency have seen significant increases in fly-tipping, specifically around the villages of Wouldham, Burham and Capstone. We have had a long legacy of urban fly-tipping, but this is not just an urban blight; it also affects rural areas.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for organising this debate on such an important subject. In my constituency, Foxcote Lane is regularly used by fly-tippers to dump fridges, building waste and all sorts of other detritus. We think that is appalling—absolutely awful—and I welcome the Home Secretary's move on respect orders to tackle some of those issues. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is right that the people involved in fly-tipping should be asked to clean up their own waste?

Tristan Osborne: I agree with my hon. Friend. Around the country, we see community payback initiatives whereby individuals who commit the crime are then sanctioned to go and clear up the mess either in that location or in parks and other green spaces. I think that restorative justice approach is absolutely a solution to this issue. Of course, this problem remains one of the biggest challenges for council enforcement departments, and the causes are multifaceted.

First, there are the economic factors. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, a key reason people engage in such behaviour is the expense of private waste management companies. People try to avoid disposal fees, and fly-tipping is a convenient alternative. Secondly, we have seen a reduction in waste disposal services; in some areas, councils have had to close household waste recycling services and/or introduce charges. Thirdly, there is a lack of enforcement. Enforcement numbers have been reduced in many council areas due to local government budget cuts and the non-statutory nature of enforcement in councils. In my view there is a correlation between the enforcement potential, the reduction of staff and the increase in fly-tipping.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this matter to Westminster's attention. It is something I have already raised on a number of occasions. The frequency of fly-tipping is going up in every location, but in many cases the number of prosecutions is static. In my local authority area, there were nearly 1,000 incidences of fly-tipping last year, but only one prosecution. We have to accept that much of it is carried out by organised criminals, not people trying to dispose of their domestic waste because the tip is closed or it is too difficult to book an appointment. Is it time for the Government to provide more support for local councils so that they can increase their rate of prosecutions and deal with the problem once and for all, rather than leaving residents, farmers and others to clear up the mess?

Tristan Osborne: I agree with my hon. Friend. In my local council in Medway there were seven prosecutions in 2022-23, which is extremely high and shows the success in that area, but she is right that it is not the same across the country. Environmental waste carrier licences need to be scrutinised, and where we see illegal activity on a commercial level, the Environment Agency and others need support to engage.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): This issue was brought into sharp focus in my constituency following a high-profile case. A large pile of debris, comprising furniture, rubble and wooden panels, was disgracefully left in place for over a year. Local residents reported the issue. It attracted vermin and posed health risks to nearby children in the schools. I am concerned that fly-tipping statistics, which

are already alarming, do not reflect the severity of fly-tipping on private land, which can fall through the cracks despite the best efforts of local authorities. I raised the issue previously and was told that the Minister had concerns that the carrier, broker and dealer regime that the last Government put in place was not fit for purpose. I was glad to hear that the Government are actively thinking of measures to tighten up controls, so I join my hon. Friend in thanking the Government for the action they are taking in this space.

Tristan Osborne: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. An element that is not mentioned is untidy land in private space, an issue that is very difficult for councils to enforce. Again, that is a non-statutory service. Some councils deal with untidy land in gardens and other private spaces, but many councils do not because of local Government cuts and reductions in funding over the last 14 years.

The statistical basis for fly-tipping is complicated. Different Governments over the last 14 years have measured it in different ways. Between 2010 and 2017 we saw a significant increase, according to BBC statistics, of around 40% in fly-tipping across the country, and that has remained static in recent years. The ways of calculating these things vary, so one question I have for the Minister is whether we should have a standardised, data-driven approach to recording fly-tipping incidences.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Fly-tipping in Greater Manchester is on the rise, costing local authorities more than £6 million in 2022. Although the practice is frustrating for my constituents, it is often caused by lack of awareness of the implications of fly-tipping and how to properly dispose of waste. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must improve environmental education and recognise that we all have a responsibility to safely and legally dispose of waste?

Tristan Osborne: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. The Labour council in Ilford has very successfully led an enforcement and education campaign, with community hubs and enforcement hubs. Love Medway Hate Litter, in my area, and Love Essex are successful campaigns that challenge litter and fly-tipping, so education is critical. As a former secondary school teacher, I know it is important to get into schools early to raise awareness about the challenges of fly-tipping.

The lack of enforcement is concerning. My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) mentioned the reduction in court fines issued. Their value fell in 2022-23 to £785,000 in total, which just touches the tip of the iceberg. To be fair, although there are no Conservative Members here for this debate, the previous Government did act, increasing fines from £400 to £1,000 under the antisocial behaviour plan, increasing court fines by £526 and abolishing local authority charges—so they were aware of the issue.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and near neighbour on securing this important debate. Fly-tipping clearly affects all parts of our country, rural and urban, and certainly my residents in Dartford. In the second quarter of 2024, there were 476 fly-tipping incidents—an increase of 21% on the first quarter—including in Leonard Avenue in Swanscombe, which

has been the scene of no fewer than 26 incidents in the past 12 months. He talks about fines to be levied, and we recently discovered that Dartford borough council has chosen not to levy the maximum £1,000 fines that have been legally allowed since August 2023, unlike the neighbouring councils of Gravesham and Medway. Will he join me in calling on Dartford borough council to get serious on fly-tipping and impose the maximum possible fines on perpetrators?

Tristan Osborne: I agree with my hon. Friend that there is a postcode lottery across the country on how councils are managing this issue. I want to celebrate the example of Medway council, my local authority, which has done outstanding work. We have introduced free bulky waste collection for residential waste, working with our contractor, to reduce the quantity of mattresses and other residential waste left on streets across the town. The Love Medway Hate Litter scheme, which followed the Love Essex programme, has raised awareness among the public. We have increased fines to the top level, and it is important that councils send a message by using Government powers to increase fines. It is right that he challenges his council leader on this matter.

We also work across boroughs. Local authorities are not islands unto themselves, so it is important that Medway works with Gravesham, Swale and other local councils on cross-boundary issues. I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) is sitting behind me.

We also have a wall of shame in Medway, to publicise people who are conducting this environmental crime by naming and shaming those who are caught and fined. We work very closely with our probation and community payback service to ensure that those who commit the crime clear up their mess. We have increasingly used CCTV technologies in hotspot locations to catch perpetrators. Those schemes in Medway have resulted in successes in challenging fly-tipping but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) said, that is not the same across all Kent areas.

I have a series of questions for the Minister. The new respect orders that the Government are introducing are extremely welcome. I entirely endorse the approach undertaken by the Home Office and others to curb antisocial behaviour, including nuisance biking and other persistent behaviours. Will the respect orders include those who engage in persistent environmental crimes, or will the Minister look at other enforcement approaches?

Courts can give different fines for fly-tipping, depending on the size, but many councils have a standard fine approach. Will that be reviewed to take into account the size and nature of the fly-tip to dissuade people from commercial fly-tipping? Will the Government monitor the number of fixed penalty notices and court enforcements occurring in each council area, because there is a postcode lottery in this country?

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I very much appreciate the opportunity to have this debate. I completely agree with my hon. Friend about raising fines and reviewing magistrates court decisions in this matter, but does he agree with me that the simplest, easiest and cheapest way to deal with fly-tipping is to take the waste out of the system in the first place, and therefore looking at mandatory take-back schemes, whereby people

[Deirdre Costigan]

bring back their goods when they are finished with them and get money back, and at genuinely recyclable products, is the way forward? Therefore, does he welcome the Government's steps to bring forward the "polluter pays" principle in the extended producer responsibility regulations that are currently being laid, and also the deposit return scheme for glass and plastic bottles, which will help to reduce fly-tips that are in black sacks?

Tristan Osborne: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the principle of the circular economy, which I entirely endorse. The linear economy that we have, which relies on waste disposal, should be challenged. I am very encouraged that, finally, the EPR guidelines that the Government are pursuing are being enacted. We should be encouraging councils to recycle, and that needs to be looked at in relation to the variations of postcode lotteries that we get. In one of the two local authorities in my area, recycling is done on a two-weekly basis, and in the other it is done weekly. Education is also needed on what can be placed in the bins as well. The producers need to be responsible for their packaging and making it recyclable, so I agree that there needs to be some work in relation to corporate interests on that.

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): Massive congratulations to my hon. Friend and near neighbour on securing this debate. I am very supportive of everything that has been said so far. One thing that I think has not been picked up yet is just how long it takes to investigate these sites. Many of them are organised crime and many are on private land. The investigations are complicated and often cross lots of boundaries, including institutional boundaries. Frankly, it just takes too long to investigate them to the right level to be able to implement a lot of the enforcement actions, so I would be very keen to hear what my hon. Friend and then the Minister have to say about that.

Tristan Osborne: Absolutely. Much commercial fly-tipping is associated with organised crime. I know from the outstanding work of Ian Gilmore and his team at Medway council that they are regularly having to challenge those quite complicated cases. They are multifaceted, involving other elements of organised crime as well. I will not talk about specific locations, because sub judice rules apply. However, we know that in Kent specifically, there are a number of sites where some of this is alleged to involve organised efforts at disposal. As well as local authorities, national enforcement agencies need to be engaged on that to target the gangs that are pursuing that commercial agenda.

The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 allows councils to use camera technologies, but sometimes there have been restrictions on the use of camera technologies, specifically in areas of hotspots. Can we look at that again, to allow local authorities to use camera technologies in a way associated with challenging this issue?

In relation to public awareness and celebrating the "wall of shame" approach, can the Government use Medway and other councils as a template example of how we can use "wall of shame" approaches to announce to the public that we are challenging this issue, and those who commit this crime, robustly? Many councils

already announce those whom they are fining for litter dropping and other types of environmental crime, yet there is an inconsistency in relation to fly-tipping.

With regard to waste disposal options, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan) on the idea of the circular economy and providing more recycling options, but I also think we need to support the Environment Agency, which saw budget reductions under the previous Government, and allow it to prosecute more illegal waste carriers. We also need to promote further collaboration among land managers, local authorities, police and the Environment Agency to establish ownership of the issue. Many farmers in my area are struggling, and the National Farmers Union has raised with me the concerns among its members that they do not necessarily know who to go to when fly-tipping occurs. They believe that the local authority approach of simply sending them a web link in relation to a fly-tip is not the best solution and is not giving them a solution, and therefore they are having to seek private sector options.

I thank the Library for providing me with the datasets for today's debate and I thank all those Members who have contributed. I look forward to the ministerial response.

11.19 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) for tabling this debate, the second on fly-tipping in just three months. How extraordinary it is that not a single Opposition Member has turned up to listen and contribute; that tells us something about the party of the countryside, and the party that is on the side of people who want to do the right thing and keep their areas clean and tidy.

I thank all colleagues for their thoughtful contributions—fly-tipping is a serious crime, and we know it blights local communities. I have been reading about the horrendous case of the front garden on Peach Avenue in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), and we appreciate the difficulty it poses to all landowners. Local councils reported over a million fly-tipping incidents in 2022-23—that is a significant burden on the UK economy, and was an increase of 10% on the three previous years. During that time, we had covid, where we were not allowed out for several months at a time, so I think we can say it is increasing year on year. What we are here to say is enough is enough. Things have to change. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford has said, there have been years of Conservative failure on this, and we have a plague of rubbish on parks, streets, front gardens, farms, rural estates, and industrial estates. I was in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) yesterday and was sending him texts on the way home because I could see some illegal burning going on as I drove back from the beautiful Hainault forest.

We want to end our throwaway society: stop this avalanche, increase recycling rates, reduce waste, and crack down on waste crime. To the point about the circular economy made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan), yesterday we

laid the deposit return scheme regulations in Parliament, and we have a statutory instrument on extended producer responsibility tomorrow. There are colleagues in the room who will participate in that debate to show the three legs of the stool—simpler recycling, EPR, and DRS, all of which are going to drive up our recycling rates, with the intention of getting to 65% by 2035.

I looked back at some news items from 2002, when the last Labour Government was trying to get the recycling rate up to 50% by 2015. That tells you something about the progress that has stalled over the last 14 years, that we are still hovering around a 43% to 44% recycling rate, and actually going backwards in some areas.

We have committed to forcing fly-tippers and vandals to clean up the mess that they have created as part of a crackdown on antisocial behaviour, and I look forward to providing further details on that commitment in due course. I met the Prisons Minister, Lord Timpson, to discuss how we can equip prisoners for their release and rehabilitation through some of the environmental work in this area.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): One of the initiatives in Hull is “bring out your rubbish” days, which clearly reduce fly-tipping. It is an initiative from Labour councillors, using the ward budgets. Is that something the Minister might consider encouraging other councils to take up across the board?

Mary Creagh: I think there is a really interesting philosophical reflection there, because one person’s rubbish is another person’s treasure. I remember leaving a beautiful Italian leather bag outside my house—it had a hole in it, and had come to the end of its life with me—and I thought I would put it on the doorstep and see what happens. Someone knocked on my door and asked if that bag was to go, and I said yes, and she was so pleased. Maybe she was going to take it away and sew it. There was also a tradition when I lived in Belgium of the braderie, where people put their stuff out—got rid of things from their granny’s attic, got rid of different things, like a massive car boot sale, because people like to get a bargain—and I do think there is a role for people to do that. We do not want to stop people putting things out for other people that might be useful, but I encourage people to ask, “Is it going to rain? Is the item going to be destroyed?” It needs to be done in a sensible way. On the council clearing things up, one often finds that other people come along and clear it up before the council even gets there.

Councils have enforcement powers to punish those who harm our communities and to deter other would-be offenders, and I encourage them to make good use of those powers, including their power to prosecute. I pay tribute to the council in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford for their actions. Fly-tipping can lead to a fine, community service or even imprisonment.

Sentencing is a matter for the courts, but the national fly-tipping prevention group, which is chaired by officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has produced guidance to support councils to present robust cases to court. I urge colleagues to encourage their councils to join that group, because there is no monopoly on wisdom in this area and it is good to share initiatives such as the wall of shame.

Instead of prosecuting, local authorities can issue fixed penalty notices of up to £1,000 to those who fly-tip or of up to £600 to those who pass their household waste to someone who does not have the proper licence. They also have powers to stop, seize and search the vehicles of those suspected of fly-tipping. They have the powers; whether they have the finances and resources after losing almost two thirds of their budgets after years of cuts to local authorities is a different question. Ahead of the previous fly-tipping debate, I wrote to those councils that reported no enforcement actions in 2022-23, and I will consider what further action is needed to encourage more councils to increase their efforts to bring them all up to the level of the good.

We are under no illusions about the scale of the funding pressures that local authorities face, and I know that many colleagues have served on local councils. We are committed to resetting the relationship between local and central Government, and we will get councils back on their feet by providing multi-year funding settlements, ending the competitive bidding for pots of money and reforming the local audit system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford raised the issue of rural fly-tipping, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger). Some 80% of farmers have been affected by fly-tipping on their land. We will continue to work with the National Farmers Union and others to promote and disseminate good practice on how to prevent fly-tipping on rural land.

The public have a vital role to play in tackling this, because 60% of fly-tips involve household waste. Householders must check the register of waste carriers to avoid giving their waste to rogue operators who promise quick, cheap waste collection.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Minister will not be surprised to see me in a debate on waste, which I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) for securing. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to constituents of mine like Norma in Red Street and Jane in Bradwell for their commitment to safe and clean streets and for their consistent reporting of fly-tips to both me and the council? I assure the Minister of my complete commitment and support for her zero-tolerance approach in tackling fly-tipping and waste crime in our communities.

Mary Creagh: It is good to see my hon. Friend. I have been travelling in Azerbaijan where I could not get his texts and phone calls, so I have had a week off, but I am glad to see that he is back, as an almost permanent shadow. I have not had my latest Walleys Quarry update, but I am sure that will come shortly after the debate. I pay tribute to the persistence of his constituents, Jane and Norma; from their Member of Parliament, I see that the Newcastle-under-Lyme persistence is contagious, and I pay tribute to him for everything he has done on behalf of his constituents in this area.

It is important that we educate householders about their duty of care in this area. I am considering reform to the waste carrier, broker and dealer regime to make it easier to identify rogue operators. I have met representatives of the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management to talk about how we can introduce qualifications around licensing. I am keen to do as much as we can in that area.

[Mary Creagh]

Whether they live in the countryside, a town or a city, people should walk through their community feeling proud of a clean environment that is free of rubbish and litter. That is why, with councils, communities and local authorities, we will work together with regulators to force offenders to clean up their mess, put a stop to the waste criminals and keep our communities clean.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. Before we finish this debate, I remind the Minister and Members of paragraph 19.45 of “Erskine May”, in which it says:

“A half-hour adjournment debate is a personal debate between the Member who has secured the debate and the Minister who is to reply...Interventions from the Opposition frontbench are not allowed. Opposition spokespersons may participate, from the backbenches, on matters which do not relate to their portfolio. Equally, because the debate is personal to the Member and the Minister, no reference should be made to the absence of other Members (for example, an Opposition frontbench spokesperson).”

References in this debate to the absence of anybody from the Opposition Front-Bench team were out of order, and I apologise for not having raised that at the time. I think it is important that we remind ourselves of the rules of procedure and the fact that, in half-hour debates, there is no opportunity for Opposition parties to participate.

Mary Creagh: Thank you for that clarification, Sir Christopher. I am happy to withdraw my remarks. We are all learning in our new jobs, and we are grateful to you for your wisdom, advice and guidance on these areas.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I thank the Minister for that courtesy.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Online Safety: Children and Young People

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered online safety for children and young people.

Just give me one second to get my notes in order, Mr Dowd.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lola McEvoy: I will!

Dame Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady has called a debate on a really important issue. Could she set out why she thinks that now is a really important time to discuss this vital topic?

Lola McEvoy: I will—and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. It is my great honour to open this debate on online safety for our children. I welcome the Minister answering for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), answering for the official Opposition. I tabled this as my first debate in Westminster Hall, because I believe this issue is one of the most defining of our time. I promised parents and children in my constituency of Darlington that I would tackle it head-on, so here I am to fulfil that promise.

I would like to put on the record that I have long been inspired by the strength of the parents of Bereaved Families for Online Safety—a group of parents united by the unbearable loss of their children and by their steadfast commitment to get stronger online protections to prevent more children’s deaths. I say to Ellen, who is here with us this afternoon: thank you for your courage—you have experienced unimaginable pain, and I will do everything I can to prevent more parents from going through the same.

The consensus for action on this issue has been built, in no small part due to the incredible drive of parents to campaign for justice. It is felt in every corner of the country, and it is our job as a Government to step in and protect our children from online harm. In my constituency of Darlington, at door after door right across the town and regardless of background, income or voting intention, parents agreed with me that it is time to act to protect our children. I am taking this issue to the Government to fight for them.

I am standing up to amplify the voice of the girl who sends a picture of herself that she thought was private but arrives at school to find that it has been shared with all her peers; she is not only mortified but blamed, and the message cannot be unsent. I am standing up to amplify the voice of the boy who gets bombarded with violent, disturbing images that he does not want to see and never asked for, and who cannot sleep for thinking about them. I am standing up for the mother whose son

comes home bruised and will not tell her what has happened, but who gets sent a video of him being beaten up and finds out that it was organised online. I am standing up for the father whose daughter refuses to eat anything because she has seen video after video after video criticising girls who look like her. I say to all those who have raised the alarm, to all the children who know something is wrong but do not know what to do, and to all those who have seen content that makes them feel bad about themselves, have been bullied online, have seen images they did not want to see or have been approached by strangers: we are standing up for you.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate on online safety for children and young people. I have a keen personal interest, as a father of two young children. Earlier this year, Ofcom published 40 recommendations about how to improve children's safety online, including through safer algorithms, and the Government rightly pointed to the role that technology companies can play in that. Does my hon. Friend agree that these companies must take their responsibilities much more seriously?

Lola McEvoy: I absolutely agree that the companies must take those responsibilities seriously, because that will be the law. I am keen that we, as legislators, make sure that the law is as tight as it possibly can be to protect as many children as possible. We will never be able to eradicate everything online, and this is not about innovation. It is about making sure that we get this absolutely right for the next generation and for those using platforms now, so I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention.

The first meeting I called when I was elected the MP for Darlington was with the headteachers of every school and college in my town. I asked them to join together to create a town-wide forum to hear the voices of children and young people on what needs to change about online safety. The first online safety forum took place a couple of weeks ago, and the situation facing young people—year 10s, specifically—is much worse than I had anticipated.

The young people said that online bullying is rife. They said it is common for their peers to send and doctor images and videos of each other without consent, to spread rumours through apps, to track the locations of people in order to bully them through apps, to organise and film fights through apps, to be blackmailed on apps, to speak on games and apps to people they do not know, and to see disturbing or explicit images unprompted and without searching for them. They also said it is common to see content that makes them feel bad about themselves. This has to stop.

The last Government's Online Safety Act 2023 comes into force in April 2025. The regulator, Ofcom, will publish the children's access assessments guidance in January 2025. This will give online services that host user-generated content, search services and pornography services in the UK three months to assess whether their services are likely to be accessed by children. From April 2025, when the children's codes of practice are to be published, those platforms and apps will have a further three months to complete a children's risk assessment. From 31 July 2025, specific services will have to disclose their risk assessments to Ofcom. Once

the codes are approved by Parliament, providers will have to take steps to protect users. There is to be a consultation on the codes in spring 2025, and I urge everybody interested in the topic—no matter their area of expertise or feelings on it—to feed into that consultation. The mechanism for change is in front of us, but my concern is that the children's codes are not strong enough.

Dan Norris (North East Somerset and Hanham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Could she comment on the use of artificial intelligence to create child sexual abuse materials? That is a key issue now. Many years ago, I trained with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children as a child protection officer, and what I learned back then is that we have to get ahead of all the technologies in order to deal with the challenges effectively. Does she have any thoughts on that point? She may be coming to it in her own remarks.

Lola McEvoy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that great threat. My area of expertise on the issue is children's and service users' voices. There is definitely space for Ofcom and the Government to try to regulate the illegal manufacturing of images through AI. When I asked children in my constituency whether they had ever seen something that they knew was made by AI, they said yes—they had seen images of people that they knew were not real—but the notifications and warnings to tell them that it was AI were not as explicit as they could be. In other words, they could tell for themselves, but the notifications were not comprehensive enough for other children, who may not have noticed. This is a real danger.

There will always be content created online that we cannot police. We have to accept—as we do with any other piece of legislation—that there will be criminal actors, but I have called this debate because there are ways to protect children from harmful content, including by using the right age verification model. I am keen to focus my contribution on trying to protect children from content, in the round, that is harmful to them.

As I said before, the mechanism for change is in front of us, but my concern is that the children's codes are not strong enough. The children in my town have told me—and I am sure everybody here knows it—that the current age verification requirements are easily passed through, and that content on some sites is deeply disturbing and sent to them without them asking for it. That means that the sites are hosting content that is deeply disturbing for children, and that the age verification is not fit for purpose. We need to talk either about stopping those sites from hosting that content, which is very difficult, or about changing the age verification process.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I want to talk about the scale of the problem that the hon. Lady touches on. The Children's Commissioner for England reveals that 79% of children under 18 have encountered violent pornography before the age of 18, with the average age of first exposure being 13. Everything the hon. Lady is saying is very important, but this is not a niche problem; it is something that parents in Winchester have spoken to me about repeatedly in the four months since I was elected.

Lola McEvoy: It is indeed prolific, for all our children—the whole generation. It is interesting that, among the different experts I have spoken to, there is consensus; the argument has been won that children are unsafe online and that is affecting them deeply, across the country. It is our job—it falls to legislators—to rectify the issue. I do not wish to defend online platforms, but they will do what the law tells them to do. They want to operate in this country. They want to make money. There is nothing wrong with that; they just have to adhere to the law. It is our job to make sure that the law is tight to protect our children. That is the crux of the issue.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): My hon. Friend is powerfully illustrating the responsibility on all of us to step up to the needs of this moment. Parents in my constituency—at schools including William Ransom and Samuel Lucas—have been leading the way in taking further proactive action, signing up to a smartphone-free pledge to delay the age at which their young people have access to smartphones. Hundreds across the constituency have already signed up to the pledge. Does my hon. Friend agree that that underlines the strength of parental feeling on online safety and some of the wider associated issues, and that it highlights our responsibility to legislate—not just to celebrate the benefits of technology, but to do all we can to protect young people from the very real dangers it presents, too?

Lola McEvoy: A smartphone-free pledge is a great idea, and I will take it to Darlington. Parents are further down the line than we are on this; children are further down the line than we are; campaign groups are further down the line than we are. We are lagging behind. We have taken action—the last Government passed the Online Safety Act. I think it is time for us to make sure that there is nothing missing from that Act. In my view, there are some areas where we could go further.

Children in Darlington have said to me that they are getting these unsolicited images—from the algorithms. These images are being fed to them. They are not from strangers, or bogeymen from another country, although that might happen. The most common complaint is that the algorithm is feeding them content that they did not ask for, and it is deeply disturbing, whether it is violent, explicit or harmful. Once they have seen it, they cannot unsee it.

That is why I am arguing to strengthen the codes. I am not sure that we should be retrofitting harmful apps with a code that may or may not work, and having to tweak a few bits of the algorithm to check whether it will actually protect our children. I think we can take stronger action than that.

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): Numerous mental health charities and a number of civil society experts have raised with me that there are powers within the Online Safety Act that must be used by the regulator. Indeed, the Secretary of State for DSIT made it very clear last week that he backed the Act and those powers. Does my hon. Friend agree that the regulator could and should act with more powers than it has?

Lola McEvoy: I am loath to tell Ofcom that it does not have enough power. As I understand it, the powers are there, but we need to be explicit, and they need to be strengthened. How do we do that? The reason I outlined the timelines is that the time to act is now. We have to explicitly strengthen the children's codes.

There are many ways to skin a cat, as they say, but one of the simpler ways to do this would be to outline the audience that the apps want to market to. Who is the base audience that the apps and platforms are trying to make money from? If that is explicitly outlined, the codes could be applied accordingly, and strengthened. If children are the target audience, we can question some of the things on those apps and whether the apps are safe for children to use in and of themselves.

Mr Dhesi: With children able to access online content a lot more easily nowadays, many of my Slough constituents feel that it is critical that the content itself is appropriate and safe. Does my hon. Friend share my concerns about the rise of extreme misogynistic content and its impact on young people, especially considering that research has shown that it is actually amplified to teens?

Lola McEvoy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the really important—indeed, deeply concerning—issue of the rise of anti-women hate, with the perpetrators marketing themselves as successful men.

What we are seeing is that boys look at such videos and do not agree with everything that is said, but little nuggets make sense to them. For me, it is about the relentless bombardment: if someone sees one video like that, they might think, “Oh right,” and not look at it properly, but they are relentlessly targeted by the same messaging over and over again.

That is true not just for misogynistic hate speech, but for body image material. Girls and boys are seeing unrealistic expectations of body image, which are often completely fake and contain fake messaging, but which make them reflect on their own bodies in a negative way, when they may not have had those thoughts before.

I want to drive home that being 14 years old is tough. I am really old now compared with being 14, but I can truly say to anybody who is aged 14 watching this: “It gets better!” It is hard to be a 14-year-old: they are exploring their body and exploring new challenges. Their hormones are going wild and their peers are going through exactly the same thing. It is tough, and school is tough. It is natural for children and young people to question their identity, their role in the world, their sexuality, or whatever it is they might be exploring—that is normal—but I am concerned that that bombardment of unhealthy, unregulated and toxic messaging at a crucial time, when teenagers' brains are developing, is frankly leading to a crisis.

I return to an earlier point about whether the parts of apps or platforms that children are using are actually safe for them to use. There are different parts of apps that we all use—we may not all be tech-savvy, but we do use them—but when we drill into them and take a minute to ask, “Is this safe for children?”, the answer for me is, “No.”

There are features such as the live location functionality, which comes up a lot on apps, such as when someone is using a maps app and it asks for their live location so they can see how to get from A to B. That is totally fine, but there are certain social media apps that children use that have their live location on permanently. They can toggle it to turn it off, but when I asked children in Darlington why they did not turn it off, they said there is a peer pressure to keep it on—it is seen as really uncool to turn it off. It is also about being able to see whether someone has read a message or not.

I then said to those children, “Okay, but those apps are safe because you only accept people you know,” and they said, “Oh no, I’ve got thousands and thousands of people on that app, and it takes me ages to remove each person, because I can’t remember if I know them, so I don’t do it.” They just leave their location on for thousands of people, many of whom may be void accounts, and they do not even know if they are active any more. The point is that we would not allow our children to go into a space where their location was shown to lots of strangers all the time. Those children who I spoke to also said that the live location feature on some of these apps is leading to in-person bullying and attacks. That is absolutely horrifying.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On that point, is the hon. Member aware that if someone toggles their location off on Snapchat, for example, it constantly—in fact, every time the app is opened—says, “You’re on ghost mode. Do you want to turn your location back on?” So every single time someone opens the app, it tries to convince them to turn their location back on.

Lola McEvoy: I thank the hon. Member for raising that issue, because there are lots of different nudge notifications. We can understand why, because it is an unregulated space and the app is trying to get as much data as possible—if we are not paying for the service, we are the service. We all know that as adults, but the young people and children who we are talking about today do not know that their data is what makes them attractive to that app.

Dan Aldridge: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene again. In my previous role as head of public policy at the British Computer Society, the one thing that my colleagues and I talked about a lot was the lack of focus on education in the Online Safety Act. I commend the previous Government for passing that legislation, which was very brave. The Act has tried to do some wonderful things, but what is missing is that we have failed to empower a generation of young people to act safely online, to be able to take back the power and say, “No, I am not going to do that.” We have failed in that so far. How do we build that in for the future?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. I would like to bring to the attention of Members that we have had a huge number of interventions and we are 20 minutes into the debate. The Minister and Opposition spokesperson will get up at just after half past 3. It is a matter for the speaker whether she takes more interventions, but that does mean that the amount of time for those who have asked to speak will be significantly more restricted than I originally planned. That is just a housekeeping matter to be aware of. There is also an issue about the length of interventions: they are getting a bit long. On a matter of this importance, I do not want to restrict interventions and contributions, but I ask Members to please bear that in mind.

Lola McEvoy: Okay, I will make progress. On the live location element, which I have discussed, I am not sure that there is any advantage in children using that, unless it is a specifically regulated live location app where the parents have given consent for their child.

I do not know whether chatting to strangers on games is suitable for children. Adding peers to a group and enjoying playing with them on games is fine, but there could be strangers from other countries, with no indication of their age. One child told me that he had found out, after about three weeks, that the person he had been playing with was a 50-year-old man on another continent. That man was probably mortified, as was the child, and they stopped playing together. Why are we leaving it up to them? That is such a high-risk strategy for those apps; we need to think about that.

It is down to Parliament to decide what is safe for our children, and to enforce it. Asking platforms to mark their own homework and police themselves will undoubtedly lead to more children seeing inappropriate, harmful content and sharing it with others. I would like the Government to strengthen the children’s codes, and consider changing the onus from reactive safety measures that make apps safe for children, when we suspect they are children, to proactively making apps or platforms safe for all children in the first place, and creating adult-only apps that require strong age verification, because adults can consent to giving their data.

A number of ways to protect children online are being debated, as I am sure we will hear this afternoon. I feel strongly that retrofitting apps once children have been exposed to harmful content or strangers, or have shared things they should not, is not the safest or most effective way to do this. A number of options around age verification are on the table, but I would like the Government to consider that being a child is tough and that children have a right to make mistakes. The issue is that those mistakes involve mass communications to peers and a permanent digital footprint, because someone has consented, aged 13, to give away their data.

We need to see whether any child can consent to give away their data, and therefore whether apps that identify their audience as children should be allowed to keep data at all. Should children be in chatrooms with strangers across the world? Should children be allowed to share their live location with strangers or people they have accepted as contacts? Should children be allowed to view unregulated livestreams or addictive-by-design content? Those questions have been raised not only by children themselves but by parents and national advocacy charities and leaders in this space. There is a consensus that we have to take action on this issue, so let us make the most of it.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

2.53 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I could talk for hours on this subject, Mr Dowd, but, do not worry, I will not. There are a number of things that I would like to say. Not many Members present sat through the majority of the Online Safety Bill Committee as it went through Parliament, but I was in every one of those meetings, listening to various views and debating online safety.

I will touch on one issue that the hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) raised in her excellent and important speech. I agree with almost everything she

[Kirsty Blackman]

said. Not many people in Parliament have her level of passion or knowledge about the subject, so I appreciate her bringing forward the debate.

On the issue of features, I totally agree with the hon. Member and I moved an amendment to that effect during the Bill's progress. There should be restrictions on the features that children should be able to access. She was talking about safety by design, so that children do not have to see content that they cannot unsee, do not have to experience the issues that they cannot un-experience, cannot be contacted by external people who they do not know, and cannot livestream. We have seen an increase in the amount of self-generated child sexual abuse material and livestreaming is a massive proportion of that.

Yesterday, a local organisation in Aberdeen called CyberSafe Scotland launched a report on its work in 10 of our primary schools with 1,300 children aged between 10 and 12—primary school children, not secondary school children. Some 300 of those children wrote what is called a “name it”, where they named a problem that they had seen online. Last night, we were able to read some of the issues that they had raised. Pervasive misogyny is everywhere online, and it is normalised. It is not just in some of the videos that they see and it is not just about the Andrew Tates of this world—it is absolutely everywhere. A couple of years ago there was a trend in online videos of young men asking girls to behave like slaves, and that was all over the place.

Children are seeing a different online world from the one that we experience because they have different algorithms and have different things pushed at them. They are playing Roblox and Fortnite, but most of us are not playing those games. I am still concerned that the Online Safety Act does not adequately cover all of the online gaming world, which is where children are spending a significant proportion of their time online.

A huge amount more needs to be done to ensure that children are safe online. There is not enough in place about reviewing the online safety legislation, which Members on both sides of the House pushed for to ensure that the legislation is kept as up to date as possible. The online world changes very rapidly: the scams that were happening nine months ago are totally different from those happening today. I am still concerned that the Act focuses too much on the regulation of Facebook, for example, rather than the regulation of the online world that our children actually experience. CyberSafe Scotland intentionally centred the views and rights of young people in its work, which meant that the programmes that it delivered in schools were much more appropriate and children were much better able to listen and react to them.

The last thing that I will mention is Girlguiding and its girls' attitude survey. It is published on an annual basis and shows a huge increase in the number of girls who feel unsafe. That is because of the online world they are experiencing. We have a huge amount of responsibility here, and I appreciate the hon. Member for Darlington bringing the debate forward today.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I will keep this to an informal four-minute limit. Regrettably, if Members speak beyond that, I will have to introduce a formal figure.

2.58 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. Some 20 years ago, I started a new job with an as yet unbranded mobile network operator. At the time, the network had no masts, no handsets and no customers. Text messaging was just catching on, the BlackBerry was in its infancy and wireless application protocol was the new kid on the block. For those who do not know what WAP was, it was a bit like having Ceefax on a handset; for those who do not know what Ceefax was, I cannot really help.

My counterparts and I at the four mobile networks were acutely aware that the introduction of 3G would change how we used our phones. I will, however, confess that understanding what that change would look like—all while using dial-up at home—was something of a stab in the dark. Nevertheless, no matter how challenging, we knew that the advent of 3G required the mobile industry to take greater responsibility to protect the safety of our customers, in particular those under the age of 18. The networks moved from walled garden internet, where access was controlled by age verification and personal identification number, to a world where internet was freely available.

The mobile networks published the first self-regulatory code of content on mobile. It was a world first, and something that UK mobile operators were rightly proud of, but the pace of change was rapid; within months, we networks published a further self-regulatory code to govern location-based services, which, as we have heard already, present a clear danger to young people. We knew then that location tracking could be used in grooming and other predatory behaviour. We published the code, but the pace of change over the past 20 years has been unrelenting, and we now arrive at a point at which almost everything we do happens online.

The role of the mobile network is no longer as a gatekeeper to services, but rather as a pipe to over-the-top services such as YouTube, WhatsApp and TikTok. Those services can be more readily controlled by both the service provider and the handset manufacturer. That is not to absolve the networks of responsibility, but to acknowledge that they operate in a mobile value chain. I might pay £25 a month to my mobile network, but if I renew my handset every two years at a cost of £800, I am paying far more to the handset manufacturer than to the mobile network operator. I believe there is a strong argument that those who derive the greatest financial value from that value chain bear far greater responsibility for keeping children and young people safe online than is currently the case.

I turn now to one specific aspect of online harm. Having worked closely with the Internet Watch Foundation during my time in industry, I am fully aware of—and I thank it for—its important work in assessing child sexual abuse image material and removing it from the internet. I have visited and met the IWF teams who have to view and assess some of the most upsetting content. Their work is harrowing and distressing, but, sadly, it is essential.

Last year, the IWF assessed more than 390,000 reports and confirmed more than 275,000 web pages containing images or videos of children suffering sexual abuse. Each page contained hundreds, if not thousands, of indecent images of children. The IWF reported that

2023 was the most extreme year on record, with more category A sexual abuse imagery discovered than ever before, 92% of it self-generated child abuse. That means that the children have been targeted, groomed and coerced into sexual activities via webcams and devices with cameras.

For the first time, the IWF also encountered and analysed more than 2,400 images of sexual abuse involving children aged three to six. Some 91% of those images were of girls, mainly in domestic settings such as their own bedrooms or bathrooms. Each image or video is not just a single act; every time it is viewed or downloaded is another time that that child is sexually abused.

That is why I conclude my remarks with a clear ask to both the online and offline media and broadcast channels of our country: please stop describing these images as “kiddie porn” and “child pornography”. I did a search of some online news channels before I came to this debate; that language is still prevalent, and it has to stop. These images are not pornography. They are evidence of a crime and evidence of abuse. They are not pictures or videos. They are depictions of gross assault, sadism and bestiality against children. They are obscene images involving penetrative sexual activity with teenagers, children and babies. If there is one thing we can agree on in this debate, it is that the media in this country must start describing child sexual abuse material for what it is. Language matters, and it is time the seriousness of the offence was reflected in the language that describes it.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I am going to have to introduce a formal time limit of three and a half minutes.

3.5 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) on bringing forward this important debate. The internet has undeniably introduced a valuable resource for learning that has transformed society, but technology has also brought with it significant risks that I believe we in this House have an urgent duty to address. Nobody knows that more acutely than all those parents who have tragically lost their children after online abuse, who are bravely represented today here in the Public Gallery by Ellen.

The statistics are sobering. Recent figures from Ofcom reveal that one in five children in the UK has experienced some form of online harm, including cyber-bullying, exposure to inappropriate content and exploitation. The NSPCC reports that more than 60% of young people have encountered online bullying, but I think the risk goes much further than that. We know that the average age at which a child first views pornography is estimated to be 12, with some evidence now suggesting it is as young as eight years old. Free and widely available pornography is often violent, degrading and extreme, and it has become the de facto sex education for young people.

The pornography crisis is radically undermining the healthy development of children and young people, and contributing to increasing levels of sexual inequality, dysfunction and violence. That reality represents how children's lives are affected by those dangers, and as parliamentarians we have a duty to keep our children safe and free from harm—online as well as offline.

Nine in 10 children are now on a mobile phone by the age of 11, and around a quarter of three-year-olds now have their own smartphone. I do not know about you, Mr Dowd, but I find that statistic particularly troubling.

I believe it is crucial to differentiate smartphone use from the broader digital environment. Smartphones, as we know, are engineered to be addictive, with notifications that stimulate the release of dopamine, the same chemical that is linked to pleasure. It is too easy for children to become trapped in a cycle of dependency and peer pressure, addicted to feeds and competing for likes on social media. Addiction is exactly what the tech companies want. Research from the Royal Society for Public Health shows that social media harms mental health—we all know that—particularly among young users. Around 70% of young people now report that social media increases their feelings of anxiety and depression.

The Children's Commissioner, Rachel de Souza, believes that Ofcom's children's codes, which the hon. Member for Darlington talked about, are not strong enough and are written for the tech companies rather than for the children. She says that we need a code that protects our children from the “wild west” of social media. In South Devon I often hear from parents overwhelmed by the digital environment their children are navigating. They want to protect their children, but they feel ill equipped to manage those complexities. Hundreds of them have signed up to the smartphone-free pledge, and are pressuring schools to take part as well. We need to give them support, by backing what they want to do with legislation.

I believe we need a legislative framework that will restrict the addictive nature of smartphones, tighten age restrictions and restrict access to social media platforms for all children under 16. We have to protect them. Those measures are crucial for online child safety, and I believe there is a broad consensus in the House that big tech must be held accountable for the harm it perpetuates. We must abide—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. I call Jess Asato.

3.8 pm

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I welcome this debate, brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy). Prior to being elected as an MP, I spent almost a decade working in organisations supporting vulnerable women and children. My experience in that area over those years was very much a case of one step forward, two steps back.

Efforts to make our children's increasingly online lives safer have been constantly outpaced by technological change. The law, the police and the courts have been unable to keep up with that change, and in its wake children have been the unwitting guinea pigs in a huge social experiment. The Online Safety Act has the potential to reset the relationship between children and the internet if the principles of safety by design are truly followed by tech companies and our regulator Ofcom. Of course we welcome age verification, which will finally come into force next year and will prevent children from accessing violent and harmful pornography.

There remains much more that we need to do in this space. That is why I am pleased to co-sponsor the safer phones Bill—Protection of Children (Digital Safety

[*Jess Asato*]

and Data Protection) Bill—sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister). Smartphones, and social media in particular, are clearly negatively impacting on the mental health of our children, as well as their sleep and learning. Only last week, in an evidence session hosted by my hon. Friend, we heard that smartphones are contributing to a significant increase in short-sightedness among children, who are glued to their phones and seeing a decline in outdoors activity. We risk creating a generation suffering from myopia, and yet—perhaps because as adults we are also glued to our phones—we have not yet acted in the best interests of our young people. We regulate the toys we give to children so that they do not contain harmful lead and are age appropriate, yet no such regulation applies to smartphones. What international board of child psychologists was consulted? What paediatricians? What parents? What children?

A particularly worrying new trend that is outpacing our ability to counter it is the rise of nude deepfakes, or AI-generated sexually explicit images. They are becoming an increasingly worrying issue in schools and more than half a million children already have experience of them, according to new data from Internet Matters. Despite the fact that creating and sharing nude deepfakes of children or non-consenting adults is illegal, the programs that make them are still readily accessible. We would not ban the possession of zombie knives without banning their sale; that is why last week I called on the Government to ban nudifying tools and apps.

We seem to be setting up our children to fail, to be harmed and to be criminalised. Some 99% of the images created are of women and girls—indeed, the apps often do not work on boys. The Government have an ambitious target to halve violence against women and girls within a decade, a target that can only be achieved if we tackle the root cause by looking online. I would be grateful if the Minister could look at how nudifying apps could be banned as part of this Government's commitment to keep women and children safe.

3.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) on setting the scene so very well and on her insightful knowledge of the subject. I am very much a supporter of the Online Safety Act, and I have spoken about it on many occasions in the past. I believe we need strong protections for our children and young people; there is just so much danger out there, and it only seems to be getting worse. I have heard some horror stories of the dangers online, so it is great to discuss such matters and try to get answers from the Minister, who I wish well in the position she now holds.

Many will be aware—my staff are certainly fully aware—that my knowledge of the world of social media is somewhat limited; I am just about using text messages on the phone. However, social media and AI have brought tremendous advantages. The Office for National Statistics revealed that 83% of 12 to 15-year-olds now own a smartphone with full internet access. It is rare to see a young person who does not have one. My grandchildren, young as they are, seem to have all the knowledge that this old boy does not.

Cyber-bullying, grooming and online exploitation are, however, at the forefront of the dangers. The Police Service of Northern Ireland revealed that, in 2023, crimes involving children being contacted online by sexual predators rose by nearly a third. Officers working with the specialist unit say that they had the busiest year since its establishment in 2010. How worrying is that trend? Grooming can happen anywhere.

Another issue of importance that I want to focus on is self-harm and suicide among younger generations. Suicides in Northern Ireland are up by 8% from what they were last year for those people in the younger category—and last year they were horrendous. More than three quarters of people saw self-harm content online for the first time at the age of 14 or younger, and individuals with a history of self-harm report being 10 years old or younger when they first viewed it. Such things are incredibly worrying. We need to see safeguards against those as young as 10 seeing that damaging content, including on self-harm.

I am aware that issues regarding content on eating disorders are also prevalent. My office has been contacted about them by countless parents; it is a massive issue for my office. There is a clear danger to life from some of this content, which has led to hundreds of young girls and boys being referred to specialist clinics and counselling to help them through it. For any parent or family, that is just heartbreaking.

The online safety strategy and action plan was brought to the Executive in Northern Ireland by the Department of Health in 2020 to last until and be reviewed in 2025. Thankfully the Online Safety Act 2023, led from Westminster, applies to Northern Ireland, and with 40% of young people using social media there is a clear need for that legislation. Again, I hope that it can be strong enough to combat the dangers that are out there.

Ever mindful of your timescale, Mr Dowd, and to give others the opportunity to speak, I will conclude. The online world and its advancements are truly a wonderful thing—even for someone like me, who does not know how it works—but there are clear problems with some of the aspects surrounding it. I hope that we can work together, alongside Ministers and large social media companies, to do our best for our young people, to use the online world to their advantage and to give them the best start in life. We want them to have that best start, but we want them to be safe—that is what we are asking for. I look to the Minister for her input and her reassurance that the things we have asked for can actually happen.

3.15 pm

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) on securing this debate. Her daughter was born just a few months before mine, when we were both mere parliamentary candidates trying to juggle our election campaigns and family life, and failing. Just last night in the voting Lobby, we swapped notes on how it is going now that we are Members of Parliament, and I think we are both failing on that as well, but we are trying our hardest. Having spoken to her in depth about this issue, I know that she is keen to champion it and that she will be successful in doing so.

My daughter is just 15 months old, and when I look at the online world around us, I have deep concern and worries for her and children growing up across the country.

The issue of online safety must be grasped urgently, and I hope that this Parliament will finally seize the initiative. Many of the hundreds of new MPs come to this issue afresh. It is great to see new colleagues and friends here today. This is a generation who have, to some extent, grown up online, are aware of the huge benefits that technology and social media have offered and are adept, to some extent at least, at using those networks—I am still not wholly sure how TikTok works—but who have also seen the increasingly toxic results for young people as technology has developed, and that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

I have been in numerous schools across my constituency of Rother Valley to speak with students, teachers and teaching staff, and the pupils I meet are impeccably behaved and interesting and interested in my role as their MP, but when I have a cup of tea with the teachers afterwards, they so often tell me about the negative effect of smartphone apps, online bullying and the frankly shocking content that youngsters are exposed to. I speak to parents across Rother Valley who are deeply concerned about the content available to children, whether it be sexual or of an addictive or exploitative nature. Many feel that they are losing parental control, to some extent at least, to the magnet of online activity. I have run an online survey for constituents about the issue of smartphones and online safety for children over the last few months and have been inundated with these worries. This is an epidemic, which is why this debate and this subject are so important.

There is good work happening to combat the worries. Recently I met a group in my constituency that is run by Sara Cunningham and works in schools across the country in combating misogyny, online violence and pornography. That incredible organisation is doing brilliant work, but it cannot be left to the third sector to regulate this issue or pick up the mess. It is surely time for Government and regulation to take a greater role. I hope that that can be done on a cross-party basis, because this issue crosses the political divide. I would like personally to praise former Prime Minister Theresa May for at least beginning to champion the issue. I hope that, now, this Government and the Minister who is present today can take the issue forward.

3.18 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy), who made really powerful and impactful comments, as have all those who have spoken today. I join her tribute to the bereaved families who have done such incredible work to campaign on this vital issue. I should, before anything else, direct everybody to the work of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), who was the architect—the genesis—behind the Online Safety Act. I was one of the many Ministers who took over that baton for a couple of years and pulled the Act together.

As the hon. Member for Darlington said, only when we meet families who have been deeply impacted by online dangers and online harms does the impact of this really land with us. For me, meeting Ian Russell, whose daughter Molly took her own life in 2017 as a result of the content that she had seen online, underlined how incredibly disastrous for young and vulnerable people the harms of the internet can be.

As the hon. Lady said, it is not just about the sites that are hosting inappropriate content; it is about the algorithms that take someone's fears and anxieties and put them into an echo chamber where they are normalised and reinforced, which is the most dangerous part of this. Unfortunately, it is the algorithms that social media companies prize above everything else; they are the most jealously guarded parts of their organisations. Molly was one example resulting from that, but there are so many other examples of suicide, self-harm, anxiety, eating disorders and body image issues that come out of that world.

A year on from the Online Safety Act, it is interesting to see how it is fully implemented, particularly against the backdrop of the speed at which technology is evolving. It is frightening because, virtually every week in our constituencies, we see examples of the harms that are out there. In my constituency, just in the last couple of weeks, junior-age children were using the online world to bully and harass each other. That is something that used to stay within the school gates. Bullying still happened—I am so elderly, and it happened when I was at school—but it was something that was left behind at the school gates; it did not follow you home. Also, 27% of children have seen pornography by the age of 11, which brings a very toxic view of sex and relationships.

The Online Safety Act will hopefully encourage providers to do what they say they are doing when it comes to protecting children online, but the Minister has a huge responsibility to make sure that that happens, and to hold not just them but Ofcom to account to make sure that it is robustly implementing the guidelines that it is setting up. There are some amazing champions of that—Baroness Kidron has made incredible strides in the other place—but we need to make sure that Ofcom has not only the powers but the capacity. It has a huge amount under its jurisdiction and there is a huge amount of pressure. I know that the Minister will work very hard to ensure that it is held to account and equipped with what it needs.

3.22 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): Huge congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) for securing this debate, which I know is of grave concern not only for my constituents in Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, but for parents and caregivers throughout the country.

I am concerned that there is a disproportionate impact on girls and young women regarding online harm. Take, for example, the report just mentioned regarding exposure to harmful content; that recent report stated that 60% of girls aged 11 to 16 said that they had received negative comments about their appearance online, so I am very concerned about that growing impact on young people, particularly girls and young women.

Even more troubling is the increase in severe online abuse, such as grooming. In cases where the victim's gender was identified between 2023 and 24, an overwhelming 81% of the children targeted were girls. I believe the increase in online harm to be directly connected to the increase in violence against women and girls.

I therefore join calls for significantly enhanced rules on social media platforms to safeguard our young people. That must tackle both the blunt and sharp ends of

[Leigh Ingham]

online harm: the insidious exposure to harmful content and the more direct and egregious abuses, such as grooming.

3.23 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) not just on securing this debate but on the way in which she made her case. I want to focus on a couple of the more technical aspects of the Online Safety Act, which are important in fulfilling the objectives that we all share this afternoon, which, as she rightly said, are to make sure that the vehicle that we now have in the OSA delivers the right outcomes for the safety of children online.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage); she is right that I had ministerial responsibility for the Act. I think, frankly, it is harder to find Conservative Ministers who did not have responsibility for it at some point or another, but what we all tried to do was make sure that the structure of the Act would support the objectives that, again, we all share.

I will mention two specific things, which I should be grateful if the Minister would consider. I do not expect her to respond to them this afternoon, but if she would consider them and write to me, I should be very grateful.

It seems to me that we need to make sure that as responsibility for implementing the Act moves from us as legislators to Ofcom as the regulator, Government and Parliament and the regulator are on the same page. There are two areas where I am concerned that that might not be the case. The first is the question whether harm to children is all about content. I do not think it is. We have heard this afternoon that many aspects of risk and harm to children online have nothing to do with the specific nature of an individual piece of content.

The Act is important, and I believe it does support Ofcom's ability to act in relation to harms beyond specific matters of content. For the Minister's benefit, I have in mind section 11 of the Act on risk assessment—as she will know, because she knows it off by heart. For everybody else here, section 11 deals with risk assessment, and on that a great deal hangs. If we do a risk assessment, the obligation is to do something about risks, and that hangs on what risks are identified in the assessment. So the risk assessment matters.

As I read the Act, section 11 says that, yes, we must risk-assess for individual harmful pieces of content, but under section 11(6)(f) we also must risk-assess for the different ways that the service is used, including functionalities or other features of the service that affect how much children use the service—which goes back to a point made earlier. Those are the sorts of things it is important to underline that we expect Ofcom to attend to.

I am grateful for the Government's statement of strategic priorities, but the point made about this being a fast-moving landscape is fundamental. Again in the Act, the codes of practice are vital, because they set out the things that platforms ought to do to keep children safe. If the platforms do the things set out in the codes,

they are broadly invulnerable from further regulatory intervention. We need to act urgently to ensure that the codes of practice say what we want them to say. At the moment my concern is that Ofcom may simply talk about current good practice and not urge advancements in good practice to be maintained by the platforms. Those are the two areas that I hope the Minister will think about in relation to the draft codes and the need for an ongoing relationship between us in Parliament and Government and Ofcom to ensure that the Act continues to deliver as we want it to.

3.27 pm

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) on securing this important debate.

I would like to say a few words about the context of this debate and the parallels between it and some of the debates in the last century, specifically to do with road safety. Despite the car being a relatively common feature on our roads from about 1900, it was not until the 1930s, when there were already 1 million cars on the road, that we decided to introduce any age limit on driving. It was not until 1983 that wearing a seatbelt became compulsory. At that time, many people, including MPs here in Parliament, argued that the law would be impossible to police, was an overreach of the state and would not save any lives. In fact, when it was introduced, deaths dropped dramatically and we got the best out of the rise of the motor vehicle. There is a strong parallel between the introduction of seatbelt measures and what we now need to do as a Parliament on online safety.

The Online Safety Act was an incredibly welcome piece of legislation, but it was the very first measure and must be seen as a stepping-stone piece of legislation rather than a destination in its own right. Most people involved in the creation of the legislation and those at Ofcom themselves would probably recognise that description. Where we need to go next, I believe, is to address issues of excess screen time, social media use and the wider harms that come from the fact that the average 12-year-old is now spending 21 hours a week on their smartphone. There are obvious harms from that. My hon. Friend the Member for Darlington highlighted social anxiety and peer-to-peer comparison and the mental health impacts of that. There are very clear impacts on sleep and on the classroom, and the evidence behind that is growing. There is also an enormous impact in that those 21 hours a week used to be spent by children doing other stuff. Children used to do other things that they now do not do because they spend time on their devices. That presents a complete generational rewiring of childhood, which needs to be considered closely.

That is why it is really welcome that last week the Government announced that they will commission a study into this area. The evidence has moved on considerably since the chief medical officer last looked at this in 2019. With fresh eyes looking at the evidence now, I believe that the chief medical officer will give very different advice. That is why I have introduced the safer phones Bill—the Protection of Children (Digital Safety and Data Protection) Bill.

I would like three things to happen. First, the age of digital consent for data sharing should be raised from 13 to 16. That would put not just Ofcom, but the

Information Commissioner's Office in a position to regulate this, and I would like extra powers for parent groups to come together to ensure that that is enforced. Secondly, Ofcom needs additional powers to make sure that it can go beyond just the content, as my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington mentioned. Finally, we need to look at this as a public health issue, as well as a tech regulation issue.

3.31 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. It has also been a real honour to be part of this debate, and I have been scribbling away because so much genuine passion has been put into it. Do I have 10 minutes, Mr Dowd?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Yes.

Victoria Collins: My cogs are turning—everyone in this debate wants to make a difference, and the time is now. That is the critical point. There is far too much illegal and harmful activity on social media and online, whether that is racist abuse, incitement to violence or the grooming of children—so much has been brought up.

Keeping children safe online is more difficult, but more important, than ever before. Several Members have mentioned that they spoke to their local parent groups and schools. I met children from The Grove school in Harpenden. One child said, "How old do you think I should be to have a smartphone?" And I said, "Well, how old would you like it to be?" He said, "Eleven." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because that is when my brother got his." It was really interesting that the teachers said, "We are discussing this as a school right now because the kids are asking those questions." What also came through was the importance of listening to young people, because they are the ones who are crying out for change and saying that something is not right.

We have heard from many Members, including the hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy), who set up the debate in a way that that none of us could follow, speaking with passion about the people behind this—the parents and the families. That is what we are all here for. We heard from the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) about how covid exacerbated problems, which highlighted the importance of discussing this issue now. The hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dineneage) talked about Ian Russell and Molly; I think most of us are aware of that story. Ian has come to Parliament many times to talk about the impact, and we must never forget his family and so many more behind them. The hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) spoke of the parallels between this issue and road safety, reminding us that we have to act now because, if we do not, we will look back and realise that we were doing a disservice to so many. We have to keep up on safety.

So much of this debate has been about identifying the issues with online safety, such as what the algorithms are sending us, location and chat features, the content and so much more. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) talked about self-generated explicit content and the pervasive misogyny that so many have mentioned. The hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) mentioned young pornography being a

crime and that we need to get the language right. That is key. Sexual inequality and violence are pervasive because of that content.

The hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington spoke about the addictiveness of phones, and the hon. Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) highlighted the fact that mobile phone use is impacting short-sightedness. The hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington mentioned sleep and asked what we are doing about the 21 hours a week spent on phones. So much of this is about what I call "digital mental health", which refers to what is happening as a whole, beyond the algorithm and the impact of the content. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned self-harm, and I will certainly keep in mind the term "generational rewiring", which the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington used.

When it comes to legislation, we have not acted fast enough and we have not gone far enough. As has been said, we need to move towards safety by design, but we also need legislation that is reactive and agile enough to keep up with the change. As Liberal Democrats, we were proud to push for the Online Safety Act to go further, and we successfully called for it to include online fraud and scams, as well as to outlaw cyber-flashing.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North talked about online games, and the fact that we need to stay up to date. The hon. Member for Gosport mentioned holding Ofcom to account. The hon. Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) talked about grooming laws, and how we need blunt and sharp elements in the instruments that we use. The right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) reminded us that behind all this, we must get the technicalities right in the Online Safety Act, highlighting that this is not just about the content, but about keeping up with the speed and agility of the change.

As a Liberal Democrat, I would like to highlight what we are calling for. The importance of being proactive has been mentioned many times, and that means calling for safety by design. We are also calling for an independent advocacy body for children's safety online. We would like to create a new online crime agency to effectively tackle illegal content and online activity, such as revenge porn, threats and incitement to violence on social media. We would also like to include a digital Bill of Rights to protect everyone's rights online. That includes balancing the rights to privacy, freedom of expression and participation. The regulation of social media must respect the rights and privacy of those who use it legally and responsibly, but should not have a laissez-faire approach.

Another important element is education. The hon. Member for Darlington said that we cannot tackle all of this content. We cannot get all of this right, but it is important that we also empower young people and parents to be able to say what is right and wrong, and to help them to feel empowered to make a change, whether that is by using tools, or by speaking up and saying, "Actually, this is not right." We should make sure that they feel they have that voice.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) mentioned that big tech needs to be held accountable—absolutely. We have to make sure that those who are building the platforms are the ones who ensure their safety by design, and that they keep up with that.

[Victoria Collins]

I close with a reminder that keeping young people safe online is more difficult, but more important, than ever before. We must act sooner rather than later and use all the tools at our disposal, whether that is through Ofcom and regulatory changes, by incentivising companies or by educating parents and children. Frankly, from the debate I have heard today, I have hope that if we work together, we can make sure that those changes are enacted swiftly and are kept up to date.

3.38 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I would like to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) for securing this debate. She spoke powerfully and knowledgeably on a wide range of issues, particularly on the children's codes, and her requests for reform and improvements.

There were many contributions from hon. Members in this important debate, but one that really struck me, and which I would like to draw particular attention to, was the contribution from the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns). When hon. Members speak in debates, there are few times when all Members listen. She spoke rightly and powerfully about the awful statistics—I say “statistics”, but I really mean the number of horrendous acts of child sexual abuse that have been and are taking place, and the impact that that will have on those children and, indeed, all people who are exposed to it. All of us, as parliamentarians, need to be very mindful of that. Each and every one is an individual tragedy.

Protecting children from harmful or illegal content is something that all Members are committed to, and it is right that we work together to protect children. I welcome the Online Safety Act brought in by the last Conservative Government. That groundbreaking legislation had the protection of children at its heart, introducing effective, pragmatic laws and restrictions to combat some of the horrors we have heard about. It was great to have several of the architects of the Online Safety Act taking part in the debate and asking pertinent questions to the Minister, whose job it is to ensure that this piece of legislation works for us, our children and our families.

As a responsible Opposition, it is now our job to pose the questions and to support the Government in delivering protections for our children. I will make my speech in that spirit, particularly with a series of questions that I have for the Minister about the Act's implementation.

I commend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology for meeting bereaved parents who have lost children to harmful online content, and for publishing the draft statement of strategic priorities for online safety. I pay tribute to those in the Gallery whose families have been tragically affected by online harms.

The Secretary of State has stated that the Government will implement safety by design to stop more harm occurring in the first place. We support the Government's aspiration to deliver safe online experiences for all users, as we did in the previous Government. It is important that we consider whether the expectation should fall on users to take precautionary steps to avoid severely harmful content, and particularly those who are most vulnerable. But when the Government talk of safety by design, it is crucial that they place the onus on

social media companies to ensure the safety of their users. Given the role that algorithms play in pushing themed content to users, what plans do the Government have to empower users to exercise greater personal control over the algorithms?

The Government outlined the need to ensure that there are no safe havens online for illegal content and activity. Although we wholeheartedly support that aim, to what extent will removing the ease of mainstream access push such content further out of sight and possible regulation? We support the Government's desire to improve transparency and accountability across the sector, but while there is a desire to increase algorithmic transparency, how do the Government intend to improve regulatory co-ordination in the pursuit of achieving that? In addition, the inculcation of a culture of candour via the transparency reporting regime will be challenging. How will that be facilitated?

In January 2024, Instagram and Facebook announced that they would block under-18s from seeing harmful content relating to eating disorders, self-harm and suicide, but it has been highlighted that the content is so prevalent that it can still be found easily online. What steps do the Government intend to take to ensure that the existing legislation is enforced?

We must ensure that children are protected from material that is not age-appropriate, such as pornography. That is why the last Government tightened up age restrictions by requiring social media companies to enforce age limits consistently and to protect their child users. It is right that services must assess any risk to children from using their platforms and set appropriate age restrictions, ensuring that child users have age-appropriate experiences and are shielded from harmful content. Again, this should be followed closely to ensure that platforms—or indeed, children—are not finding ways around restrictions. Currently, age checks are not strong across all platforms. I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on how the Government plan to do that. Restrictions introduced by the last Government are a good start but, as was noted in the debate, as technology changes, we must keep up.

The Government talk of ensuring that age assurance technology to protect children is being effectively deployed. How do they intend to ensure that that happens and to ensure that companies are investing in the most up-to-date technology to facilitate it? Will the Government proactively stress-test that capability?

We must stand against the harms that come our children's way. We must build on the success of the previous Conservative Government by ensuring that all restrictions and laws work. We must embrace technology and understand that the internet and social media, in general, are a force for good, embedded in our daily lives, while also understanding that checks and balances are essential if we are to ensure a safe online environment for all users.

3.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy) on securing this debate. As hon. Members can see, debates in Westminster Hall take a whole different form from debates in the House; they are a lot more informative

and collegiate, and Westminster Hall is a much nicer place to debate. I welcome the parents in the Public Gallery and thank them for their commitment and the work they continue to do to make sure that this issue stays on our agenda and continues to be debated. I know they have met my colleagues, and I look forward to meeting them as well.

I am grateful to all hon. Members for the incredibly powerful and informative contributions to today's debate. As the mother of two young children, I always have online safety on my mind. Every time I am on my phone in front of my children or want to keep them distracted by putting on a YouTube video, it scares me, and the issue is always at the back of my mind. It is important that we as parents always have the safety of our children in mind. My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) talked about being a parent to really young children while being an MP or candidate. As a mother who had two children in part during the last term, I can assure him that it does get easier. I am happy to exchange some tips.

The growth in the use of phones and social media has been a huge societal change, and one that we as parents and citizens are grappling with. I am grateful to all hon. Members here who are engaging in this debate. The Government are committed to keeping children safe online, and it is crucial that we continue to have conversations about how best to achieve that goal. We live in a digital age, and we know that being online can benefit children of all ages, giving them access to better connections, education, information and entertainment. However, we know that it can also accentuate vulnerabilities and expose children to harmful and age-inappropriate content. We believe that our children should be well-equipped to make the most of the digital opportunities of the future, but we must strike the right balance so that children can access the benefits of being online while we continue to put their safety first.

Last week, the Secretary of State visited NSPCC headquarters to speak to their voice of online youth group. That is just the latest meeting in a programme of engagement undertaken by the Secretary of State and my colleague in the other place, Baroness Maggie Jones. Getting this right has been and will continue to be a long process. Many hon. Members here will remember the battle to get the Online Safety Act passed. Despite the opposition—some Members in this place sought to weaken it—there was cross-party consensus and a lot of support, and so it was passed.

Richard Burdon (Leeds East) (Ind): On a number of occasions during the passage of the Online Safety Bill in this House, I raised the story of my constituent Joe Nihill from Leeds, who sadly took his own life after accessing very dangerous suicide-related content. I want to bring to the Minister's attention that before Ofcom's new powers are put into practice at some point next year, there is a window where there is a particular onus on internet service providers to take action. The website that my constituent accessed, which encouraged suicide, deterred people from seeking mental health support and livestreamed suicide, has been blocked for people of all ages by Sky and Three. Will the Minister congratulate those two companies for doing that at this stage and encourage all internet service providers to do the same before Ofcom's new powers are implemented next year?

Feryal Clark: I thank the hon. Member for making that point and I absolutely welcome that intervention by internet providers. As I will go on to say, internet providers do not have to wait for the Act to be enacted; they can start making such changes now. I absolutely agree with him.

Many colleagues have raised the issue of the adequacy of the Online Safety Act. It is a landmark Act, but it is also imperfect. Ofcom's need to consult means a long lead-in time; although it is important to get these matters right, that can often feel frustrating. None the less, we are clear that the Government's priority is Ofcom's effective implementation of the Act, so that those who use social media, especially children, can benefit from the Act's wider reach and protections as soon as possible. To that end, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology became the first Secretary of State to set out a draft statement of strategic priorities to ensure that safety cannot be an afterthought but must be baked in from the start.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of suicide and self-harm. Ofcom is in the process of bringing the Online Safety Act's provisions into effect. Earlier this year, it conducted a consultation on the draft illegal content, with one of the most harmful types being content about suicide. Child safety codes of practice were also consulted on. We expect the draft illegal content codes to be in effect by spring 2025, with child safety codes following in the summer.

Under the Act, user-to-user and search services will need to assess the risk that they might facilitate illegal content and must put in place measures to manage and mitigate any such risk. In addition, in-scope services likely to be accessed by children will need to protect children from content that is legal but none the less harmful to children, including pornography, bullying and violent content. The Act is clear that user-to-user services that allow the most harmful types of content must use highly effective age-assurance technology to prevent children from accessing it.

Ofcom will be able to use robust enforcement powers against companies that fail to fulfil their duties. Ofcom's draft codes set out what steps services can take to meet those duties. The proposals mean that user-to-user services that do not ban harmful content should introduce highly effective age checks to prevent children from accessing the entire site or app, or age-restrict those parts of the service that host harmful content. The codes also tackle algorithms that amplify harm and feed harmful material to children, which have been discussed today. Under Ofcom's proposal, services will have to configure their algorithms to filter out the most harmful types of content from children's feeds, and reduce the visibility and prominence of other harmful content.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) and others discussed strengthening the codes. Ofcom has been very clear that it will look to strengthen the codes in future iterations. The Government will encourage it to do so as harmful online technology and the evidence base about such technology evolves.

Sir Jeremy Wright: Will the Minister give way?

Feryal Clark: I am short of time, so I will have to proceed.

[Feryal Clark]

For example, Ofcom recently announced plans to launch a further consultation on the illegal content duties once the first iteration of those duties is set out in spring next year. That iterative approach enables Ofcom to prioritise getting its initial codes in place as soon as possible while it builds on the foundations set out in that first set of codes.

My hon. Friends the Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) and the hon. Member for Aberdeen North raised the issue of violence against girls and women. In line with our safer streets mission, platforms will have new duties to create safer spaces for women and girls. It is a priority of the Online Safety Act for platforms proactively to tackle the most harmful illegal content, which includes offences such as harassment, sexual exploitation, extreme pornography, internet image abuse, stalking and controlling or coercive behaviour, much of which disproportionately affects women and girls. All services in scope of the Act need to understand the risks facing women and girls from illegal content online and take action to mitigate that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) set out powerfully the issues around child sexual exploitation and abuse. Child sexual abuse is a vile crime that inflicts long-lasting trauma on victims. UK law is crystal clear: the creation, possession and distribution of child sexual abuse images is illegal. The strongest protections in the Online Safety Act are against child sexual abuse and exploitation. Ofcom will have strong powers to direct online platforms and messaging and search services to combat that kind of abuse. It will be able to require platforms to use accredited, proactive technology to tackle CSEA and will have powers to hold senior managers criminally liable if they fail to protect children.

I am running short of time, so I shall make some final remarks. While we remain resolute in our commitment to implementing the Online Safety Act as quickly and effectively as possible, we recognise the importance of these ongoing conversations, and I am grateful to everyone

who has contributed to today's debate. I am grateful to the brave parents who continue to fight for protections for children online and shine a light on these important issues. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer), asked a host of questions. I will respond to him in writing, because I do not have time to do so today, and I will place a copy in the Library.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I call Lola McEvoy to briefly respond to the debate.

3.57 pm

Lola McEvoy: Thank you, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to the Minister for her response.

We have had an insightful and cohesive debate, and I thank all Members for their time and expertise. It is clear to me—and, I am sure, to all of us—that innovation has outstripped legislation, leaving our children and young people shouting for help. Crime is organised and exacerbated on these platforms, and the police cannot stop it without our help. Twenty-four-hour access means that content and bullying have caused school refusals, and our educators cannot teach our children without our help.

Children and young people never share everything with their parents, but the sheer quantity of material, along with the functions of content providers, means that parents cannot protect their children without our help. Children's mental health services are drowning after huge surges in the number of those needing support. Many issues are caused or exacerbated by online platforms, and our NHS cannot get our children well without our help. Today has demonstrated cross-party agreement for action, as well as agreement that this is one of the great issues of our time. We have our consensus, so now let us use it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered online safety for children and young people.

Suicide and Mental Health of Young People: Tatton

4 pm

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I will call Esther McVey to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of suicide and mental health of young people in Tatton constituency.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I would like to convey my appreciation to the Minister for replying to this extremely important and sensitive debate on the management of withdrawal from antidepressant medication, specifically selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, and the profound impact that that process can have on the mental health and suicide risk of young people.

I would like to begin by conveying my sincere thanks to my constituent, Gina Russell, who met me and bravely shared the experience of her daughter, Olivia, who tragically took her life in September 2021, following withdrawal from SSRI medication. Olivia's mum is unable to be with us in Westminster Hall today. However, I know that she and her family are watching this debate at home, as they are determined to help prevent others having to suffer the same fate as Olivia.

I would also like to place on record my thanks to the charities Mind, Rethink Mental Illness, PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide, as well as to The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition and the House of Commons Library for the information provided to me before this debate. While the information was insightful, it was deeply disturbing, as it revealed that Olivia's experience of declining mental health as medication was withdrawn was far from unique and was a known risk, which made me determined to pursue this debate on behalf of her family and thus bring Olivia's story and her family's suffering to a wider audience.

Let me start by painting a picture of Olivia, who was an intelligent, creative and hard-working 25-year-old who had just left Tatton to live in London. Her parents remember her as wonderful and vibrant—a loving daughter and a loving younger sister to her brother, Luke; a cherished and adored granddaughter; and a loyal, kind and supportive friend. She lit up a room and was admired by all who knew and loved her.

In November 2020, during the pandemic, Olivia became anxious. She began taking an SSRI—citalopram—to manage her anxiety. Initially, Olivia responded well to treatment. However, when the time came to discontinue the medication in June 2021, she experienced a rapid decline in her mental health, which was far worse than what she had previously faced. She then resumed SSRI treatment in August 2021, finally taking her life in September 2021. When she first came off her medication it was without consulting her GP, because she was feeling better. She should have been warned about stopping taking the antidepressant. The family was later to discover that citalopram is one of the most difficult antidepressants to come off.

Tragically, the Royal College of Psychiatrists suggests that between a third and half of people who take antidepressant medications experience withdrawal symptoms to some extent. The severity and duration of these symptoms, and whom they affect, is not certain. In Olivia's case, the withdrawal symptoms were severe and the resulting deterioration in her mental state ultimately led to her taking her own life. Members should bear in mind that suicide remains the leading cause of death among young people under 35 in the UK, and the mental health of young people has declined alarmingly in recent years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady for the very sensitive way in which she is delivering her speech. In Northern Ireland, the worrying thing about suicides is that we have had an 8% increase in the last year. It worries me greatly that people are unable to cope with life. Does the right hon. Lady not agree that the inability of GPs—I think she mentioned this—to refer patients to early intervention on mental health is something that must be tackled? Early support for young people, and easy access to it, is the only way to give a lifeline to those who are struggling at a very young age.

Esther McVey: I thank my colleague and friend for that pertinent intervention.

The pandemic lockdown exacerbated the mental health crisis, as it brought isolation, uncertainty and disrupted routines at home, in education and in the workplace, taking an immense toll on young people's wellbeing. During that period, the use of antidepressants, including SSRIs, rose significantly. Meanwhile, access to in-person medical support was often severely limited, which may have worsened the challenges faced by patients navigating their mental health and medication.

Last year, the closure of England's only dedicated antidepressant withdrawal helpline, the Bristol and district tranquilliser project, left a further gap in support services for patients, at a time when mental health services are under immense strain. Analysis from the children and young people's mental health coalition shows that 1.5 million children and young people could need new or increased mental health support as a result of the pandemic.

Those factors combined to create a perfect storm for young people struggling with mental health challenges, with many prescribed SSRI medication as a solution by their medical practitioners. It is important to note the life-changing and positive impact that such medication has had on many people across the country, and I do not seek to contest that or the ability of those medications vastly to improve the mental health of many patients. However, we must also acknowledge that the process of withdrawing from SSRIs can be fraught with challenges that leave patients vulnerable.

In Olivia's case, her family believed that she was left in the dark. Her mother recalls that the information provided by her GP was limited and did not adequately warn of the risks of sudden or poorly managed withdrawal. As a result, following her death, the exceptional decision was taken by the coroner to produce a prevention of future deaths report. It found no evidence that Olivia was explicitly warned about the risks of relapse or the potential signs of withdrawal, or told that she might feel worse before feeling better. The report concluded

[*Esther McVey*]

that while advice may have been given, it was not conclusive and concern was expressed regarding the inconsistency of advice that each GP might give patients. The report could not say with confidence that every GP within Olivia's practice was discussing the key risks associated with SSRI medication withdrawal.

That requires our immediate attention, as the principle of informed consent, which underpins our healthcare system, requires that patients are fully aware of the benefits and risks of any medical procedure or treatment. The General Medical Council's professional standards for decision making and consent stipulate that doctors' discussions should recognise the effect of the patient's individual clinical circumstances on the probability of benefit or harm occurring.

Guidance from the GMC acknowledges that the amount of information doctors provide to patients can vary due to time constraints. Where such time constraints exist, doctors are encouraged to involve other medical professionals, such as clinicians, or to refer patients to the patient information leaflet accompanying their medication. Patients are legally entitled to a patient information leaflet with their prescriptions, but the responsibility for providing it lies with pharmacies. That places the onus on patients, potentially in a vulnerable position, to navigate complex decisions alone. The leaflets are often lengthy and rely on a patient reading and understanding information provided.

The issue is compounded by outdated guidance. Until recently, guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence—NICE—suggested that withdrawal symptoms typically last one to two weeks. That has now been updated to reflect the fact that symptoms can be more severe and prolonged, but the updates have not yet translated into comprehensive and systematic changes to ensure that patients are adequately supported. Inconsistent guidance on antidepressant withdrawal has resulted in many patients experiencing distressing and debilitating symptoms. Patients have been misdiagnosed as suffering from a relapse of their original mental health condition, and others have been left fearful about stopping using their antidepressants. That may have contributed to many individuals staying on their antidepressant medication for longer than is necessary, with a report in 2023 suggesting that 2 million people are taking antidepressants for five years or more.

What improvements can be made to ensure the better facilitation of SSRI withdrawal? Olivia's family believe that there are measures that could be taken that would go far in protecting patients when withdrawing from the medication. A move as simple as placing a warning label on the packaging of SSRI prescriptions would be a straightforward way to convey the dangers of the medication. It would not replace the more comprehensive information provided in a patient information leaflet, or the guidance of a GP. However, it would act as a safeguard in circumstances should those fail. The safety of patients' prescribed medications must be guaranteed, not left to change based on appointment time constraints or whether a patient has read in full the often lengthy patient information leaflet.

The story of Olivia and her family is a painful reminder of the urgent need to address the risks associated with SSRI withdrawal, and the broader mental health crisis

facing young people today. While SSRIs have transformed countless lives, we cannot overlook the vulnerability of those navigating withdrawal. We owe it to families like Olivia's to ensure that no one feels unsupported or uninformed when taking such important decisions. Simple measures, such as enhanced warnings on medication packages, improved guidance for medical practitioners and comprehensive advice can make the process of withdrawal palpably easier and safer, potentially offering better outcomes for individuals navigating the complex process of withdrawal from SSRIs.

I would be grateful for the Minister's consideration of the issues I have discussed. Finally, in Olivia's instance, the coroner produced a prevention of future deaths report, so I ask the Minister how such a report can become wholesale advice to the medical profession? Will he work with me to ensure that it does, in order to prevent lives like Olivia's being cut tragically short?

4.12 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for securing this debate and raising many important issues. I also thank her for sharing the tragic story of Olivia. My heart goes out to Olivia's family and loved ones; it is a truly heartbreaking situation and process that they have gone through.

The right hon. Lady made a number of important points about withdrawal from SSRI antidepressants. A number of those points are quite specific, and I do not have in specific responses my notes. With her leave, I would like to write to her with responses on those points. She made a point about the coroner's advice, which contained a lot of useful counsel on how we might address and tackle the issues raised. I will certainly look at that in detail, and will happily take those matters forward with her. We have a shared interest in addressing the issue. If the system is not working and people who are on that antidepressant are not being supported with withdrawal, we need to look at that in detail. We need to tackle it—I share her views on that.

I will turn to some more general points about the Government's position on mental health. We have made suicide prevention and mental health a priority, especially for young people. Many of the issues raised today are symptomatic of an NHS that is broken. Looking at the figures, the challenges that face the NHS are truly sobering.

About 50% of lifetime mental health conditions are established by the time an individual is 14 and 75% by the time they are 24. Evidence suggests that the prevalence of mental health conditions is rising among children and young people. In 2023, 20.3% of eight to 16-year-olds had a probable disorder, compared with 12.5% in 2017. Of course, the covid-19 pandemic exacerbated needs, with analysis showing that 1.5 million children and young people under the age of 18 could need new or increased mental health support following the pandemic.

According to the Darzi review, 343,000 referrals for children and young people under the age of 18 are waiting for mental health services, including 109,000 referrals waiting for more than a year. Under the NHS Cheshire and Merseyside integrated care board, as of the end of September 2024, 10% of children and young people still waiting for first contact with NHS-funded

mental health services were waiting for more than 951 days, equating to 1,301 people. Half of those still waiting had been waiting for more than 300 days. There are 13,010 children and young people still waiting for first contact with NHS-funded mental health services.

Until recently, there had been an upward trend in suicide rates for children and young people. For women between the ages of 10 and 24, the rate has nearly doubled since 2012, rising from 1.6 per 100,000 to 3.1 per 100,000 in 2023.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): Over the past 10 years in England and Wales, one student has died every four days as a result of suicide. Despite that forlorn tragedy, the law remains unclear about the duties and responsibilities universities have towards their often very vulnerable young students. Will the Minister meet me and members of the LEARN Network and ForThe100 to discuss the introduction of a statutory duty of care for all higher education providers?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Lady for that important intervention. I am happy to meet her and the LEARN Network. The Government cannot do all this alone; we need to work in partnership with all sorts of different stakeholders, including universities and the higher education sector. We would support any partnership working that we can do.

Until recently, there had been an upward trend in suicide rates for children and young people. For women between the ages of 10 and 24, the rate has almost doubled, but the trend for children and young people has flattened in the past year, despite overall increases in suicide. Although those rates are low compared with those for other age groups, children and young people are a priority group in our mission to tackle suicide. The Department is commissioning research via the National Institute for Health and Care Research to advance our understanding of why rates of suicide have been increasing in certain age groups.

We are committed to reforming the NHS to ensure that we give mental health the same attention and focus as physical health. It is unacceptable that too many children, young people and adults are not receiving the mental health care that they need. We know that waits for mental health services are far too long. We are determined to change that. That is why we will recruit 8,500 additional mental health workers across children's and adult mental health services. We will also introduce a specialist mental health professional in every school and roll out young futures hubs to provide timely mental health support to our children and young people.

We are working with our colleagues at NHS England and the Department for Education as we plan delivery of those commitments. Furthermore, the Government are also committed to tackling suicide as one of the biggest killers in our country. The suicide prevention strategy proposes targeted support for priority groups such as children and young people. The Department for Education is reviewing the statutory guidance on relationships, sex and health education, and the Secretary of State for Education is clear that children's wellbeing should be at the heart of it.

Some 79 voluntary, community or social enterprise organisations up and down the country have been allocated funding through the Department of Health and Social

Care's £10 million suicide prevention grant fund over the two years to March 2025. These organisations—from local and community-led through to national—deliver a broad and diverse range of activity that will prevent suicides and save lives.

Early intervention on mental health issues is vital if we want to stop young people reaching crisis point. Schools and colleges play an important role in that early support, which is why we have committed to providing a mental health professional at every school. Mental health support teams help to meet the needs of children and young people in education settings; such teams, which are made up of mental health practitioners and education mental health specialists, are available in schools in Tatton.

However, it is not enough to provide access to a mental health professional when young people are struggling. We want the education system to set young people up to thrive, and we know that schools and colleges can have a profound impact in promoting good mental health and wellbeing. Doing this well takes a holistic approach, drawing in many aspects of the school or college's provision. Many schools are already doing that, and my Department is working alongside the Department for Education to understand how we can support such good practice across the sector, and across the length and breadth of our country.

The opportunity mission will break the link between people's background and their success. The mission will build opportunity for all by giving every child the best start in life: high-quality early education, early child health, home learning environments and family support. The mission will also support children to achieve and thrive, ensuring high school standards with a broad curriculum, excellent teachers and targeted interventions, an inclusive approach to special educational needs and disabilities, mental health support, access to arts, culture and sport, and youth services and provision.

In our manifesto, the Government committed to rolling out young futures hubs. This national network is expected to bring together local services, deliver support for teenagers at risk of being drawn into crime or facing mental health challenges, and, where appropriate, deliver universal youth provision. The hubs will provide open-access mental health support for children and young people in every community.

We are concerned about the widespread availability of harmful material online, promoting content on eating disorders, suicide and self-harm, that can easily be accessed by people who may be young and/or vulnerable. We have been clear that the Government's priority is the effective implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023, so that those who use social media—especially children—can benefit from its wide-ranging protections as soon in their lives as possible. Earlier this year, Ofcom concluded its consultations on the draft illegal content and child safety codes of practice. We expect the illegal content codes to be in effect by spring 2025, with the child safety codes following in the summer.

I will turn to other aspects of our plans to improve mental health services. The Mental Health Bill, which was announced in the King's Speech, will deliver the Government's manifesto commitment to modernise the Mental Health Act 1983 by giving patients greater choice and autonomy and enhanced rights and support, and aims to ensure that everyone is treated with dignity

[Stephen Kinnock]

and respect throughout their treatment. It is important to get the balance right to ensure people get the support and treatment they need when necessary for their protection and for that of others.

I am pleased to say that the Bill has been introduced in the Lords and will be coming to the Commons in the new year. The Bill will make the Mental Health Act fit for the 21st century, redressing the balance of power from the system to the patient and ensuring that people with the most severe mental health conditions get better, more personalised care. It will limit the scope to detain people with a learning disability and autistic people under the Act unless they have a co-occurring mental health disorder that needs hospital treatment.

I conclude by once again commending the right hon. Member for Tatton for securing the debate and colleagues from across the House, including the hon. Members for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for sharing their insight on the vital issue of suicide prevention and mental health care for children and young people. I am committed to working with the right hon. Member for Tatton and her hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling, to take forward these issues, and I hope that we can, together—across the House—address this vital issue.

Question put and agreed to.

4.25 pm

Sitting suspended.

Project Gigabit

4.35 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the rollout of Project Gigabit in rural areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your unexpected chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

Broadband and internet access are as vital today as electricity and water. They underpin our daily lives, helping us work, learn, access healthcare and stay in touch with loved ones.

In my former career in healthcare, I saw the transformative potential of digital connectivity. From telemedicine to electronic records, fast and reliable broadband has revolutionised how care is delivered, making it more efficient and accessible, but for too many of my constituents in rural areas these opportunities remain out of reach.

Over recent years, the UK has made remarkable progress in expanding broadband access. Project Gigabit, launched as part of the Conservative Government's national infrastructure strategy in 2020, aims to deliver gigabit-capable broadband nationwide. Nearly four years on, 81% of UK households have gigabit access, compared with just 7% in January 2019—a dramatic leap that highlights the success of the initiative.

In constituencies like mine, Farnham and Bordon, that progress has been essential. Faster, more reliable broadband has driven economic growth, created jobs, improved educational opportunities and enhanced social inclusion. However, the roll-out has not been without challenges, especially in rural areas where significant disparities persist.

The Conservative Government committed £5 billion to Project Gigabit to deliver the fastest broadband to homes and businesses across the country. That funding has supported 37 major projects worth £1.9 billion and reached more than 1 million premises. An additional 118,000 gigabit vouchers have been awarded, enabling rural households and businesses to upgrade their broadband infrastructure.

The rural gigabit connectivity programme, with £200 million-worth of investment, targeted the most remote and hard-to-reach areas. These upgrades have transformed connectivity in places previously left behind. Public sector buildings such as GP surgeries, libraries and schools have also benefited, ensuring that vital services have the infrastructure to support their communities. The resilience provided by gigabit broadband was especially crucial during the covid-19 pandemic, enabling remote working, virtual learning and digital healthcare.

For those not covered by Project Gigabit, the universal service obligation introduced in the Digital Economy Act 2017 provided a safety net. That legal guarantee of a minimum of 10 megabits per second ensured that no one was completely left behind.

Despite these successes, however, there remains a stark urban/rural divide in broadband access. Although 81% of urban premises now have gigabit-capable broadband, only 44% of rural premises can say the same. These statistics highlight the ongoing challenges facing constituencies like Farnham and Bordon.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC) *rose—*

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con) *rose—*

Gregory Stafford: I give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds).

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right to identify the progress made in constituencies like his, Farnham and Bordon, or mine, East Hampshire. Does he agree, however, that improvement is all the more urgent and important in the most rural areas, where there is already very poor or no mobile signal and very poor broadband speed? They are not on the list for the commercial gigabit roll-out and some are not on the list for the second tier of gigabit roll-out. On top of all that, they hear the announcement that the PSTN—the public switched telephone network—is going to be switched off. In the event of an emergency, in the event of a power cut, they are in danger of being marooned.

Gregory Stafford: My right hon. Friend makes an extraordinarily prescient point. That is a combination of factors that will leave many in rural areas, especially those who are elderly or have other caring needs, at a real disadvantage. That is why it is so essential to turbocharge this roll-out going forward.

Ann Davies: Gigabit availability in my constituency of Caerfyrddin in west Wales is just 42%. The Welsh average is 70% and the UK average is 79%; we are on 42%. The Public Accounts Committee has previously said that the 2030 target for full UK-wide gigabit coverage is not feasible, given the delays and the overreliance on commercial providers. Can the Minister reassure the people in rural Wales that they will not continue to be left behind, and that the target will actually be met? Diolch.

Gregory Stafford: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The fact is that many of our rural constituencies are so far below the national average that it is a real problem. In my constituency, gigabit coverage lags well below the national average, with 65.5% of premises connected in the old constituency of South West Surrey and 64.4% in the old constituency of East Hampshire. Both are over 10% below the UK average despite being just an hour's drive away from London. In the villages of Tilford, Dippenhall and Greatham, broadband speeds are shockingly poor. In one Dippenhall postcode, 100% of properties lack speeds above 10 megabits per second. Similarly, in parts of Greatham, constituents are stuck with outdated speeds that cannot support modern digital demands. To put this in perspective, Londoners with gigabit connections enjoy speeds of up to 1 gigabit per second, while my constituents struggle with speeds 100 times slower.

These numbers represent more than just technical deficiencies; they have a real and profound impact on people's lives. Take, for example, a resident of Dippenhall who wrote to me to share their frustration. Their home is deemed inaccessible by Openreach, leaving them completely excluded from the benefits of gigabit broadband. Another example is Victoria, a magistrate in my constituency who commutes two hours each way to London. Victoria's broadband speed—1.5 megabits per second download and 0.8 megabits per second upload—makes it impossible for her to work remotely or participate in virtual court hearings. During the covid-19 pandemic, while her

colleagues in London worked from home with ease, Victoria was left unable to contribute. This digital inequality places an unnecessary strain on her family life, finances, and professional opportunities.

Even Moor Park, in the east of Farnham, suffers from poor speeds of just 20 megabits per second download and five megabits per second upload—far below what is needed for modern working or learning. These residents, along with those in Beacon Hill, Hindhead and Frensham, feel increasingly left behind in a world that is becoming ever more digital.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Perhaps we should hear a bit of good news, as it is only right that we should do that. Whenever the DUP were in partnership with the Conservatives, part of that deal was a £200 million boost for Northern Ireland to ensure better connectivity. All of that has been spent. Some 96.42% of premises in Northern Ireland now have the most up-to-date connectivity. But connectivity for rural businesses is the issue—there are still some 60,000 businesses that need to be reached. When it comes to looking forward to the future, to see what we can do, does the Minister agree that small businesses need to be focused on?

Gregory Stafford: Absolutely; I agree. As Conservatives, I am very happy to work with the DUP on any matters that are in our interest together. It just goes to show that this is not just a regional issue—it covers the whole of the United Kingdom. We need to support small businesses.

That brings me to a number of those compound challenges that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) also talked about. According to a Lloyds bank report, 11 million people—nearly 21% of the UK population—are digitally disadvantaged. In Surrey, an estimated 200,000 people face digital exclusion. It is the same in Hampshire, particularly in Headley Down, Grayshott and Liphook. Even in more populated areas, such as Farnham town, broadband speeds are far below the national average, affecting businesses, schools, and families. For many of my constituents, the lack of reliable broadband creates barriers to accessing healthcare, education and job opportunities. It also isolates people socially, particularly the elderly and the vulnerable. I pay tribute to two county councillors in my constituency, Debbie Curnow-Ford and David Harmer, who are working hard to help with that.

In hard-to-reach areas such as Dippenhall and Moor Park, alternative technologies offer some hope. Satellite-based internet, for example, could provide connectivity to rural areas where traditional infrastructure is not economically viable. Competitive bidding within Project Gigabit has already allowed smaller telecom providers to target these underserved regions, breaking Openreach's historical monopoly.

Earlier this week I met representatives from CityFibre, which operates in parts of Hampshire, including Bramshott, Liphook and Headley Down. Their involvement shows how opening the market to competition fosters innovation and provides tailored, affordable broadband packages to meet local needs. That diversification is critical for ensuring fair and affordable access for all.

Diversifying the network also encourages local internet service providers, such as Grayshott Gigabit in my constituency. It is an award-winning full fibre broadband

[Gregory Stafford]

service and the winner of the Internet Service Providers' Association UK award in 2024 for best rural provider. Those smaller-scale operatives can only continue to expand if they have continued Government support.

While I recognise that the new Labour Government have pledged to deliver nationwide gigabit broadband by 2030, I want to hold them to account. As my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) pointed out when he was the shadow Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, we must avoid recreating the digital divide seen in Wales, as referenced earlier, where only 76% of premises have gigabit access, compared with nearly 90% in England.

The Labour Government must ensure that rural areas are not left behind. We cannot repeat past mistakes, in which funding and resources disproportionately favoured urban centres, leaving rural communities to fend for themselves. To address those challenges, I join colleagues in writing to the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology with the following requests: that the full £5 billion allocated to Project Gigabit is retained; that the funding is divided proportionately between urban and rural areas; and that rural areas where broadband is not commercially viable are prioritised for future investment.

As I have said, Project Gigabit has already transformed lives and communities, but there is much more to do. We owe it to constituents such as Victoria, the residents of Dippenhall and the families in Moor Park to deliver the connectivity that they deserve. Let us ensure that no community, urban or rural, is left behind in the digital age. It is time to close the digital divide once and for all.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I remind Members to bob if they wish to be called.

4.47 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): While it is a pleasure to speak in the debate today, I am hoping it is one that we do not need to keep having. Like many of us, I represent a rural community, and if there is one thing I am desperate to fix, it is sorting out t'internet for my constituents. I make no apologies for my local dialect because up north, we all joke about the rubbish internet signal in rural Yorkshire. It is a huge barrier for many.

There are unique perplexities in the geography of my constituency of York Outer; anyone who has seen it on a map will know that. Some call it a doughnut and some call it a Polo mint. Effectively, it is sweeping Yorkshire countryside with vibrant villages and closely knit communities. However, we see one challenge, and that is the focus of today's debate: broadband.

Those unique perplexities do not just extend to the constituency's map; there are cases within it. Take Haxby and Huntington. Forgive me the pun: because of the way my constituency is wired, quite literally, there are roads where a house on one side has fantastic connectivity, but on the other side the internet is terribly slow, and the last time that side got an update, Teletext was on the TV.

A quick roll-out of good internet really matters for our mission of economic growth, so I welcome the more than £500 million in the Budget, committed for 2025-26,

to deliver Project Gigabit and the shared rural network. It will play a pivotal role in delivering full gigabit broadband coverage by 2030. However, the focus of my remarks is to feed back on an important experience for one of my constituents, and on why an important upgrade in York Outer is needed.

I start on a specific issue that I would like to pick up with the Minister separately, if he would be so kind as to meet me. I have a Ministry of Defence site in my constituency, in the area of Strensall, that recently missed out on a roll-out of hyperfast connectivity. There are nearly 100 military houses on that site that need an upgrade, and they need it badly. For context, some of the people there are suffering with speeds of less than 10 megabytes per second on copper cables, compared with some residential houses opposite that now have speeds of up to 1,200 megabits per second, and—colleagues, wait for this—at the same cost! Serving families deserve so much better. I am not sure whether it is the Defence Infrastructure Organisation or Openreach that is responsible for the project, but I would love to get it fixed, if possible, with the Minister's help. If I could meet him, that would be brilliant.

I will draw on another case study. I have heard from residents in Haxby about Project Lightning, a 2019 initiative to bring full-fibre to the village. Although the work was completed, unfortunately some houses were missed out. The cost of that is felt by one couple who recently told me that they work from home, but are now struggling to join calls with clients. They cannot both go on calls with clients at the same time, and that is affecting their fantastic small business.

I have also had constituents write to me about the need for upgrades in Hopgrove, just four miles from York city centre. I am hopeful that Project Gigabit and the Government's work on the internet roll-out more broadly can help my constituents, something I would like to discuss in detail another time. I am supportive of the Government's work to roll out Project Gigabit, and my case studies hopefully illustrate a glimpse of why it is so important.

Finally, I thank the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) for securing this debate, allowing me to raise those important constituency cases.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Thank you for your forbearance. Please try to keep to three minutes. I call Tim Farron.

4.51 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your guidance this afternoon, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) on introducing a very important debate.

I will focus my remarks on my constituency. Project Gigabit has done an awful lot of good in Cumbria, but there are issues, even in postcodes within scope. For example, across Cumbria around 900 properties in my constituency are deemed within scope, but will not be connected because of their rural isolation. Many of those will be hill farms that desperately need to be connected, not least so that they can bid for funding through the environmental land management scheme.

Perhaps of greater concern are the places that are in scope, but in deferred scope. I want to name four parishes in my constituency, near Appleby: Hilton, Murton, Warcop and Ormside. Those are communities on very low speeds at the moment. Some people are forced, against their better judgment and almost against their will, to give money to Elon Musk to use Starlink instead of the very limited broadband opportunities that are available to them.

While those communities are within scope but in deferred scope, they wait for the contract holder, Fibrus, to give them a date, and because they are within deferred scope, nothing is happening on the ground to connect them. Also, they do not have access to the voucher scheme, which would allow them to work with our absolutely brilliant Cumbrian Broadband for the Rural North, otherwise known as B4RN, an award-winning community interest company that has connected so many homes throughout rural Cumbria to gigabit and greater broadband speeds.

So I want to press the Minister—this is my one ask of him—on whether he will ensure that those parishes I have listed, Ormside, Warcop, Hilton and Murton, are either given a date for connection under Project Gigabit, or are descoped so that vouchers can be made available and B4RN can then step in and fill the gap. We had a public meeting in the snow in Murton last December—next weekend it will be 12 months ago—where BDUK made all sorts of promises of which it has fulfilled absolutely none.

Will the Minister give personal attention to either descoping those communities so they can get broadband through the B4RN and the voucher system, or give Fibrus—and more importantly BDUK—a kick up the backside to make sure they bring the communities into scope, and give a date in the next few months so that those communities, which are very remote in many other ways, are connected properly to gigabit broadband speed?

4.54 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) on securing this debate—although the mention of Liphook in his speech confused me, as I was always under the impression that my aunt's MP was the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds)—

Damian Hinds: I was, but not any more.

Joe Morris: Clearly, I have got something wrong.

I want to address a few of the issues experienced in my constituency. As many Members here today will be well aware, it is the largest constituency in England, taking in large parts of Northumberland, going all the way up to the Scottish border and all the way across to the border with Cumbria. I am regularly contacted by constituents who are trying to enjoy the dream situation of living in England's most beautiful county, but who are unable properly to work, attend meetings with clients or generate the economic growth that this country so sorely needs.

I speak to people in villages such as Stocksfield, Riding Mill, Hedley on the Hill or even Darras Hall, who I know have had frequent issues with getting the

appropriate broadband speeds delivered to them. Residents of those villages are continuously working to try to get the broadband speeds that they deserve.

There is a real feeling that for the past 14 years many rural communities were left to sit in splendid isolation, abandoned by the Conservative party. As the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon eloquently said in his opening remarks, they were left to fend for themselves.

I am absolutely proud to be part of the Labour party that won a swathe of rural seats at the last general election, that is committed to ensuring our rural businesses can grow, and that can ensure that the world-class businesses across my constituency are able not only to access high-speed internet, but to do so in the very smallest communities. When I go out and meet constituents across the north Tyne area, internet is one of the bugbears most commonly raised with me on the doorstep, alongside a lack of housing and the state of the NHS. I hope the Minister will consider how we can get high-speed internet to those most rural constituencies and the hill farms that the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) mentioned, to ensure that they are given the opportunity to benefit from Project Gigabit.

4.56 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd.

I should start by saying that I have some sympathy with the Minister, because this is the second time today that he has had to suffer my representations on this subject. He kindly set aside 10 minutes this morning to hear all about Honiton and Sidmouth, and he will have to hear more about it now.

The village of Gittisham in east Devon illustrates the shortcomings of the rural broadband policy that we saw under the last Conservative Government. After four separate attempts by different commercial providers to lay fibre to some parts of the village, the connection still falls 100 metres short of many of the properties—and that is not an isolated example. Across the part of east Devon that I represent, I hear similar things from people in other villages, too.

Three weeks ago, Connecting Devon and Somerset, the local authority-led body charged with connecting commercial organisations, scaled back its full-fibre broadband roll-out. That provider, which four years ago said it would be able to deliver to Gittisham, is no longer able to do so. It was contracted to deliver broadband to over 55,000 properties across Devon and Somerset, but to date it has delivered to fewer than 19,000.

When I spoke with the Minister and his officials earlier today, it was very helpful to learn that, although national gigabit-capable broadband coverage now reaches 85% of the country, in rural Honiton and Sidmouth—the area I represent—we lag far behind at just 61%.

I will bring my remarks to a close, given that I have already had 10 minutes of the Minister's and his officials' time today, but I just want them to take this away: if coal was the fuel that powered the 19th century and oil was the fuel that powered the 20th century, then information—data—is the fuel that powers the 21st century, and in much of east Devon we are not getting it.

4.59 pm

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

I thank the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) for raising this important issue today. However, I wonder if he could come with me for a few seconds, away from Surrey, to Diracleit on the Isle of Harris, where I stood a few weeks ago. It is a small settlement, with only a few houses and a few social houses on the main road, but it is an internet desert. There are three tourism businesses in that settlement that know they are losing money, losing paying guests and losing their minds with frustration because of slow internet connections.

Despite superfast broadband fibre running along the main spine of the Western Isles, and many success stories—people can work for software companies in California from Lewis, and for insurance companies and accountancy firms in Glasgow and London—to be a few hundred metres off the beaten track is to remain in an internet desert.

In Harris, 10% of households are unable to get decent broadband, and the same is true across the rest of the Western Isles: 10% of households cannot get speeds over 10 megabits per second. Some of us are living life in the slow lane. Diracleit, small as it is, is not hard to reach; it is only one mile from the streetlights and sophistication of Tarbert in Harris—the ferry port and the centre of the Harris universe—and there are many other places in the Western Isles and rural Scotland just like Diracleit.

Scotland has a scheme similar to the UK gigabit voucher scheme: the Scottish broadband voucher scheme. Theoretically, that scheme would provide £5,000 to premises with speeds of less than 30 megabits per second and, theoretically, it was meant to be completed in 2021. However, it is still in the procurement stage. In response to a recent freedom of information request, the Scottish Government revealed that they expect the roll-out of superfast broadband through the R100, or Reaching 100%, scheme to reach everywhere by 2028. I do not know how many megabits per second there are until 2028 but, even in Scotland, the SNP manages to build ferries faster than that.

There are some successes. For example, the holy island of Iona has received superfast broadband. That is very good for Columba's monks, who can now put down their quills and pick up their keyboards, but in the Western Isles, we feel we are waiting a long time. People and businesses in Diracleit and dozens of other single-track road settlements are staring at that never-connecting wheel of death. I know the Minister is under pressure to deliver for rural England, but I urge him to have words with Ministers in Scotland, who have let down the Western Isles and many other parts of rural Scotland. I hope he can press them to connect us—perhaps he could send them an email.

5.2 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) for securing this important debate. One of the very first pieces of casework I received after the general election was from a constituent living in a village called Tollerton, who wanted access to full-fibre for domestic and commercial purposes. He told me that he had been contacting

Openreach on and off for two years, trying to find out when the upgrade would start, and that the proposed connection date had moved four times. He consequently described the roll-out of full-fibre as “shockingly slow”. You will not be surprised, Mr Dowd, to hear that he lived in one of the 6 million hard-to-reach properties classified as area 3 by Ofcom. I encourage the Minister to think about how to best accelerate work to connect hard-to-reach properties as a priority to ensure that we meet our nationwide 2030 target.

Thankfully, I have been able to confirm that Openreach has a customised installation plan for Tollerton that will sit outside the core commercial build programme. My constituent described that confirmation as “amazing news”, and work should start early in the new year. None the less, the volume of communication I receive about full-fibre tells me that residents are frustrated about perceived delays. I would therefore be interested to hear more from the Minister about steps being taken to remove barriers to roll-out, including flexible permitting and sharing infrastructure where possible.

I acknowledge the work of the previous Government in starting the roll-out of full-fibre, which is of national importance. However, as our manifesto clearly says, “the rollout of gigabit broadband has been slow.”

I therefore welcome the new Government's commitment to “make a renewed push to fulfil the ambition of full gigabit and national 5G coverage by 2030.”

Full-fibre uptake to date in my constituency of Rushcliffe is very high, at 55%, which is above the national average. With a growing tech industry, significant house building and many people continuing to work from home, I believe demand will only grow further. But for parts of rural Britain, that is likely to require early investment in wireless and satellite provision for places where it may prove prohibitively expensive to provide a full-fibre connection. I would therefore welcome hearing more from my hon. Friend the Minister about his planned approaches for this.

5.4 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) on securing this debate. From the comments made today, there seems to be consensus across the board about the challenges faced by our rural communities—challenges that are obstructing the growth of rural businesses and ensuring that some of the most vulnerable members of our community cannot reach key council and health services. Most importantly, as a constituent said to me on Saturday at my advice surgery, “How on earth am I meant to complain to you every day if I can't connect to the internet?”

My hon. Friend the Minister has kindly already visited my constituency to meet my constituents. He visited the fantastic Redditch town centre, but he knows that my constituency is overwhelmingly rural. Although picturesque, many villages can sometimes be labelled hard to reach. I would be interested to know what plans the Government have to support these more remote locations. It is vital that rural businesses that are developing every day, families who want to stay connected and people fighting social isolation have the level of connectivity they deserve. The benefits can be immense for all our communities.

Progress has been made by the previous Government and by my own, Conservative-controlled Worcestershire County Council, but there is much more to do, and as my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) said, we really should not be having this conversation in five more years.

5.6 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I will start by saying that this is not really about fast internet. It is about fairness. It is about opportunity. It is about helping individuals and helping us as a nation to live up to our potential. How are we supposed to lead innovation on the national stage if we still have many areas where people cannot even make a phone call or children who cannot get online are left behind? We have been talking today about rural communities who feel left behind and have untapped potential. The hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) highlighted that. My hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) talked about the fuel of our economy.

This is really about the people behind the slow internet and the inability to get access. It is about the businesses that cannot get off the ground and the remote workers who cannot work. I have a constituent right in the middle in Ashridge who actually works for UK Research and Innovation, but he cannot even get 4G access. Someone just down the road has 20 times the speed, but he himself is not eligible for a voucher. It is about the children in Scotland who have to use their phones to get online. It is about the grandma who cannot stay connected to her family, because there is no way for her to see her grandkids online. It is about the parent trying to get healthcare sorted out for their child.

The hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) highlighted the patchiness of provision in his seat and how one street is wired differently from another, which is actually the picture across this nation. For me, what comes to mind are the words, "Inequality, inequality and inequality". In my seat, I have one area—Markyate, Flamstead and Gaddesden—of which almost 90% has the worst 10% in the UK, whereas 2 miles down the road in east Harpenden 100% have the fastest 10% in the UK. It is inequality that is there throughout.

The patchy roll-out was mentioned. My hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) talked about those left in limbo. My hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth talked about those let down by the roll-out. This is about unlocking our economic potential, reducing those inequalities and connecting our communities. As Liberal Democrats, we are calling—as I am sure we all are—for no property to be left out of broadband connectivity. The Government must prioritise major investment in broadband for underserved communities. We also want to raise concerns about the inequality of provision in the 5G network.

I conclude with a series of questions. What is the Minister doing to ensure that there is roll-out to every home, including clarity on those who have slipped through the net or been let down by previous roll-outs? What work is he doing with local authorities and communities to ensure that those who are left out know what they can do? What work is being done with companies to

drive innovative solutions, including on transport? I ask because many of these rural communities are connected by train and other transport, and once people leave, they still cannot get on the internet. What work is the Minister doing with new technologies, such as blockchain even, to drive connectivity? The other day I spoke to one of my friends, who had come over to the UK from Ukraine. He said, "I'm very happy that I have been really welcomed in this country, but the internet is slower here than back home in Ukraine." We need to ensure that our country is leading on this issue and that we get the basics right for us to drive innovation.

5.9 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) for securing this important debate. As was clear from his speech and his diligent, razor-sharp focus on targeting the delivery of gigabit broadband in different parts of his constituency, he is a true community champion. His constituents are lucky to have him.

That is a theme of the debate. All Members have spoken about individual parts of their constituency where broadband is a challenge. That goes to show how important our digital backbone is in the United Kingdom. I will resist the temptation to mention parts of my constituency, such as Queen's Road or Ellesmere Road in Weybridge, where we have done work to deliver gigabit broadband. The debate demonstrates how important the issue is. It is one that inevitably and invariably gets the attention of Members of Parliament, so that they advocate for their constituents and try to deliver it.

Project Gigabit demonstrates simply that where there is a will, there is a way. Back in 2019, 7% of properties had what is defined as "gigabit access" or 1 gigabit per second. In April 2024—the last official stats we have—that had reached 81%. In fact, it is believed that the 85% target, due to be reached in '25, has already been reached. That is a huge roll-out of gigabit broadband to households over the past five years of a Conservative Government.

There are of course people who do not have gigabit broadband, and it is critical that we work to ensure that they can have that vital accessibility. That is absolutely not just about being able to watch this debate in HD—to listen to my dulcet tones and to see the spots on my face; it is about industry and connectivity, and the events of covid showed just how important that is. Look at the £5 billion investment allocated to the project; some data shows that that is probably a £60 billion contribution to the UK economy.

How do we go about rolling out the delivery of gigabit broadband across the country? We as Conservatives know that the way to do it is to get industry involved and work with it. That is why 80% of the gigabit broadband target is linked to industry bringing it through, although we recognised that to get to the further 20% of roll-out, we needed to bring in subsidy and break down barriers. That is where we move from the initial phase of Project Gigabit, which was to do with industry delivering, to now, with the public subsidy we have seen over the past few years.

[Dr Ben Spencer]

A great concern, however, is future inequalities, in particular in delivery to rural areas versus urban areas. The great concern is that over the next six months to a year, there will be a reallocation of priority away from rural areas to urban areas.

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): I do not know where the hon. Gentleman got that from.

Dr Spencer: The Minister chunters from his seat, but in his speech, please can he assuage that concern? The way to do so is to provide transparent data on the prioritisation of funding and the roll-out.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I call the Minister.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): Lord, I had not expected that so quickly—nor did you earlier, Mr Dowd. It is great to see you in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) on securing the debate.

I will say first that our ambition is no different from that of the previous Government, which is to get to precisely the same numbers by 2030 as was stated previously. I am pretty confident that we will be able to get there. There are significant challenges, which I will try to explain in a moment.

As the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) rightly said, the whole idea of BDUK and Project Gigabit was to enable gigabit-capable broadband to be brought to nearly every property in the UK, primarily through commercial operators advancing on the basis of commercial viability. We knew that that would be impossible in some areas, which was why there would have to be a subsidy from the Government—or the previous Government knew it, and we subscribed to that, too. The difficulty is that that precise decision by the commercial operators as to where is commercially viable changes all the time. It is a moving target; county by county, they constantly revise decisions on the properties they will cover on a commercial basis. Therefore, the decision by BDUK about how many properties to include in the subsidised roll-out also vary.

That is happening at a time when the market is considering long-term investments. Openreach has decided to increase significantly the number of places it expects to roll out to on a commercial basis. Other operators are worried. In the south-west, operators have already been unable to fulfil their commitments, and other contracts have had to be entered into. That makes reaching secure outcomes in each constituency a difficult process.

I have made this offer before. Some of the dramatis personae of this debate are similar to those I have met in other quarters at other times. I am happy for any individual MP who has concerns in their patch to meet my officials and those from BDUK to go through this issue village by village and do a precise piece of work. I know these are very real issues. As the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon said in his opening remarks, this is not a luxury that is nice to have; it is essential to people's livelihoods, economy and sometimes their lives,

whether we are talking about mobile connectivity or broadband. Many aspects of that have to be delivered over the next few years.

I issue one word of caution. A number of hon. Members referred to hard-to-reach properties. That is a very broad definition. There are properties that are very hard to reach where, frankly, a roll-out cannot be achieved by a commercial operator or the taxpayer. That is where, as several hon. Members have said, we must be imaginative over the next few years about alternative means of delivery. That might be a wi-fi operation or reliance on satellite. Some people have already taken up the satellite option at £75 a month, as has been mentioned, although I am not particularly advertising that. It is problematic that there is only one operator in that space. I hope there will be more in future because competition is good in this market. I would praise the previous Government for that. There is not just one operator; we have allowed competition to operate in the roll-out of broadband.

Members, including some on the Government Benches, have had conversations about ducts and poles. There have been rows about the inconsiderate roll-out from some operators that have brought in street furniture that is otiose, redundant or duplicates what is already there, or where they have chosen not to use ducts because they do not want to talk to the commercial operators. I have been trying hard to ensure that all operators work as collaboratively as possible, within the bounds of competition law, to deliver broadband without obstructions.

I feel as though I have had all the villages of the UK brought to mind, and I am not sure that I have managed to write them down correctly—I apologise if I get things wrong. I welcome the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon to the House; I believe a family member was also here for a while. I have good news for him, although he might already know it, so he may not think it is as good as I do. He has been worrying about connectivity at the Beaver industrial estate, and I think AllPoints Fibre is coming early in 2025 to sort that out.

I looked at the figures for superfast, ultrafast, full-fibre and gigabit in the hon. Member's constituency. While his constituency is actually ahead of the rest of the UK on superfast—it gets more than 30 megabits per second—that is not going to be sufficient for most people in the next few years, so we want to get much higher than that. On all the other measures, his constituency is some way behind the rest of the UK. I accept that there is a challenge there, and I am thoroughly determined to meet it.

The hon. Member referred to digital exclusion, in terms of physical access to gigabit-capable, ultrafast or full-fibre broadband. There are many different factors that might lead to digital exclusion. If I had a criticism of the previous Government—well, I have quite a few criticisms, but one that even they would accept as fair—it would be that we did not have a digital inclusion strategy for 10 years. In that time, in many areas of the country, whether because of poor skills, poverty, disability or the physical exclusion that the hon. Member referred to—I know it well in the south Wales valleys—there has been a level of digital exclusion that makes it impossible for people to take part in today's economy or society. We need to address all that. It is my hope that, before we get to the end of the year, we will be able to point to the next steps in digital inclusion that we as a Government need to take.

The hon. Member seemed to say that the previous Government were absolutely wonderful but left the country in a terrible state in relation to broadband, especially in his constituency. If I might gently say, Conservative Members, including the shadow Minister, have to decide which way they are going to go on that: were they a great Government or were they not really up to it? I know what the country decided.

There is no rural/urban divide on this issue. I fully accept that there are specific challenges in many rural areas—my own constituency is semi-rural—but in many urban areas, while superfast broadband or gigabit-capable fibre is theoretically going down the street, it is not going into every building because of a whole series of other issues that we also have to address. That does not mean that we are redirecting Project Gigabit money away from rural to urban areas; more than 90% of the money has been spent in rural areas and will continue to be spent in rural areas.

The fundamental misconception in the letter that the hon. Member signed, and which quite a lot of other Conservative Members signed, which was brought forward by the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), was that Project Gigabit was always designed to take gigabit-capable broadband to wherever it was needed. There was not a specific definition of rural or urban, and I am not changing that. It is need that determines where the money is spent—nothing other than that—and I fully accept that the vast majority of that is going to be in rural areas.

I welcome the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) to the House; I have campaigned a lot in her seat—not very successfully. She makes a good point that many villages in rural Wales are some of the most disadvantaged in this area and in mobile connectivity, which is why I am pleased that we recently rolled out seven new enhanced masts for mobile connectivity in Wales, including, I think, in her constituency. That does not answer the broadband issue, but we hope to address that through Building Digital UK.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) referred to t'internet. On the defence site in his constituency, my understanding is that that is a Ministry of Defence responsibility, but we will chase that up and write to him on that issue. He is absolutely right—Defence families should not be at a worse disadvantage than those across the road who are not in Defence properties. I know that the Secretary of State for Defence is keen to address those issues, because I have spoken to him about it.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) referred to Starlink, and he is absolutely right. He rightly gave a list of villages, which were Warcop, Hilton, Murton—with a “u”, not an “e”—and Ormside, about which BDUK is presently in the process of negotiating. I do not want to descope at this point, because I very much hope that we will get to a resolution in the next month, but he makes a strong point. If it proves necessary to abandon ship, as it were, he can come back at me on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris)—we must stop meeting like this—was sitting in the same place in the Chamber last week when we had a debate about tourism in his constituency. He is right that the tourist industry cannot survive without proper broadband. To rectify some of the issues that he was

talking about last week, including with some of the beautiful villages in his constituency, we need to be able to roll out broadband.

I need to be careful about this point, but there will be properties that are not commercially viable or viable for the taxpayer to fund, because they are simply too difficult to reach. I think everybody accepts that, but it will be a tiny proportion—probably 1% or fewer. As several Members have said, however, we at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology definitely need to accelerate the process of thinking about the alternative mechanisms we can provide. Some people are already relying on Starlink, but we may need to come up with other solutions.

The Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins), is absolutely right that we need to look for technical solutions. That is why, through UK Research and Innovation and the research and development side of DSIT, we are keen to look at those areas.

The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) talked about villages where broadband stopped 100 metres short, which is absolutely infuriating for everybody. Obviously, that is the kind of thing that we want to address. I know that he has already had conversations, and we have another meeting with several of his colleagues coming up, so we will be able to address those issues then.

I know bits of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) well, as he knows, and I have visited where some of my family are from. We need to look for very creative solutions in his constituency, because he is right that if someone is making Harris tweed, they want to be able to sell it, but they cannot create a business unless they have proper high-speed broadband. I note that we have superfast on Iona. I do not think there are many monks left there, but there is a community. In fact, it has a couple of hotels that I have stayed in, which also want and need connectivity.

I will give the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon a couple of minutes to wind up, but I will quickly refer to my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish), who is right that we need to do something about flexi permits. We have already written to the Department for Transport about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) has similar issues in his patch.

Finally, I welcome the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge, to his post, as I failed to do when we had DSIT questions last week. He has to decide whether the last Government were absolutely brilliant or whether they completely failed in this area.

5.28 pm

Gregory Stafford: I thank all Members who have contributed. Given that I have only one minute and 14 seconds to respond, I will not go through everyone's villages. What has become clear today is that there is significant concern around the roll-out in rural areas. I am pleased that the Minister responded in the way that he did, and that he has offered to meet us to go through it “village by village”—I wrote that down. I am sure that many Members here will be taking him up on that.

[Gregory Stafford]

I will go back to what I said at the start: the facility to have superfast, gigabit-enabled broadband is going to be essential, and it is essential that we reach the target by 2030. We need to ensure that those people who are living in the most rural areas are not left behind, and that with the Opposition and the Government working together, we can move forward so that every property that is able has gigabit connectivity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the rollout of Project Gigabit in rural areas.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 26 November 2024

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Regulation of NHS Managers: Consultation

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Ensuring strong and accountable NHS leadership will be critical to fixing a broken NHS and delivering our health mission. We know the important role that high-quality leadership plays in fostering a positive, compassionate, and transparent culture within the NHS while ensuring that local organisations are anchors of growth and opportunity in the areas that they serve.

Currently, NHS managers and leaders are not a regulated profession. Today, I am announcing that the Department of Health and Social Care is launching a 12-week consultation on options for the regulation of NHS managers, as part of a programme of work to meet the Government's manifesto commitment to introduce professional standards for, and regulation of, NHS managers. This issue, and the related question of the duty of candour, has been variously highlighted by the Kark review (2019), the infected blood inquiry (2024) and the ongoing Thirlwall inquiry into events at the Countess of Chester hospital.

It is essential that managers are also supported with the skills they need to deliver transformation and increase productivity in the NHS, which is why today's consultation forms part of a wider programme of leadership and management development work to equip the NHS with the leaders needed to deliver our 10-year plan. This includes establishing a college of executive and clinical leadership to champion and enhance the support available to NHS leaders, and asking Sir Gordon Messenger, through the 10-year plan process, to look at how we can accelerate efforts to develop more systematic talent management in the NHS.

This consultation seeks views from all partners, including health and care organisations, regulators, professional bodies, health and care managers and senior leaders, the public, patients, and other health and care staff, on the most effective way to strengthen oversight and accountability of NHS managers. We are seeking views on:

- the type of regulation that may be most appropriate for managers
- which managers should be in scope for any future regulatory system
- what kind of body should exercise such a regulatory function
- what types of standards managers should be required to demonstrate as part of a future system of regulation
- the sequencing of the introduction of a regulatory regime for NHS managers, alongside work that is already being undertaken by NHS England to support their development
- a new professional duty of candour to cover NHS managers, and making managers accountable for responding to concerns about patient safety.

We are today also publishing a separate report on the findings of the Department's call for evidence—launched in April 2024—on the existing statutory duty of candour on providers, which is a key step to fulfilling a recommendation from the infected blood inquiry. We will use the findings of our consultation on manager regulation, and the call for evidence, to help inform the final response to the Department's review of the statutory duty of candour.

Views from partners will be critical in informing further policy decisions during the next phase of this work to support and improve NHS leadership. We will publish our findings and set out next steps following the closure of the consultation.

[HCWS251]

Radioisotope Shortage

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I am today updating the House that the temporary reduction in the production of radioisotopes has been resolved and that the supply of affected radioisotopes has returned to normal.

Throughout the shortage, my Department worked with industry, the NHS, in particular the radiopharmacy community, and the devolved Governments to make best use of available stock, ensuring critical patients were prioritised. Suppliers and NHS trusts and hospitals displayed great flexibility throughout this incident. Thanks to this collaborative approach from all parts of the system, we were able to manage the unique challenges presented by radioisotope shortages and help ensure fair and equitable access for UK patients.

This will have been a challenging time for patients and their loved ones as well as healthcare professionals. Services are returning to normal, and the NHS is working to book in patients who have had scans delayed, while continuing to ensure patients with the most critical needs are prioritised.

My Department will continue to monitor supplies of the affected radioisotope.

[HCWS248]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration Rules Change

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules.

Introduction of a visa requirement on Colombia

We are today introducing a visa requirement on all visitors from Colombia. Nationals of Colombia will also be required to obtain a direct airside transit visa if they intend to transit via the UK, having booked travel to another country. The visa requirement comes into force at 15:00 GMT today.

Consequently, the planned change to allow nationals of Colombia to apply for an electronic travel authorisation from 27 November 2024 for travel to the UK from 8 January 2025 will no longer be introduced.

There will be a four-week, visa-free transition period for those who already hold confirmed bookings to the UK obtained on or before 15:00 GMT 26 November 2024, where arrival in the UK is no later than 15:00 GMT, 24 December 2024. Arrangements are in place so that Colombian nationals can apply for visas. We are publicising the changes so that travellers are aware and can plan accordingly.

We are taking this action due to an increase in the number of Colombian nationals travelling to the UK for purposes other than those permitted under visitor rules since the visa requirement was lifted in November 2022. This has included a significant and sustained increase in asylum claims, and high rates of refusals at the border, due to people travelling without the intention of visiting for a permitted purpose. This increase in asylum claims and refusals has added significantly to operational pressures at the border, resulting in frontline resource being diverted from other operational priorities.

The decision to introduce a visa requirement has been taken solely for migration and border security reasons. Our relationship with Colombia remains a strong and friendly one. Any decision to change a visa status is not taken lightly, and we keep the border and immigration system under regular review to ensure it continues to work in the UK national interest.

Changes relating to the Ukraine schemes

Almost three years on from the start of the conflict, we continue to stand firm with the people of Ukraine, and to show that those who need our help are still warmly welcomed in the UK. We have extended that welcome to nearly 250,000 people who have come to the UK (or had their existing permission in the UK extended) under the Ukraine schemes. To provide future certainty, in February, the UK Government announced that Ukrainians with permission under one of the Ukraine schemes would be able to extend their permission for a further 18 months through the creation of a new Ukraine permission extension scheme. Applications are due to open in early 2025, and the immigration rules we lay today will provide people with further certainty about their future by outlining the requirements of the new scheme.

The bespoke scheme will provide the same rights and entitlements to access work, benefits, healthcare, and education that Ukrainians have enjoyed under the existing schemes. The scheme will also be fee-free, with applications being accepted within the last 28 days of their current permission—in line with most other visas routes—to ensure Ukrainians have sufficient time to apply to the scheme.

Ukraine permission extension scheme opening

The overarching principle of UPE is to provide continued sanctuary in the UK for those who still need it while the war in Ukraine continues. Under the principles of the Ukraine schemes, UPE will continue our generous offer to those Ukrainians, and their eligible family members, who are already here. It is open to those who have previously been granted permission in the UK under the Ukraine schemes (or leave outside the rules on the same basis) who meet the criteria for applying. Applicants will also be required to have been resident in the UK (and islands) and/or Ukraine since holding permission under the Ukraine schemes.

Individuals should apply before their current permission expires. This is important, because as is the case with all other visa routes, those who allow their permission to lapse will lose their rights to receive benefits and healthcare, and to work and rent. Work is under way to mitigate any risks associated with this, and my Department will continue to work closely with other Departments, and in particular with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Works and Pensions, to ensure that people make an application in time.

Under UPE, there will need to be adequate care and accommodation arrangements in place for children, in order to meet our safeguarding obligations. Where a child is not in the UK with their parent, we will seek parental consent to confirm their current living situation. In some cases, referral to the local authority where the child is living will be necessary. We are also aware that different members of some family units under the Ukraine schemes will currently have differing periods of permission, as they may have applied to come to the UK at different times due to their personal circumstances. Due to this, where a Ukrainian child is resident in the UK with their parent and both hold permission under the Ukraine schemes, the child's period of permission granted to them under UPE will be aligned with that of their parent. We believe there is merit in aligning with the parent in the best interests of the child.

Ukraine extension scheme closure

In May this year, we closed the Ukraine extension scheme to all individuals, except to UK-born children with a parent who has, or has had, Ukraine scheme permission; they have still been able to apply under UES to regularise their permission in the UK. Upon the opening of the UPE scheme in early 2025, we will close the UES route completely, and UK-born children will instead apply through UPE, though they will not need to have had prior permission. This will streamline the visa routes by channelling all in-country applications through UPE, removing any confusion that might otherwise be created by having two "extension" schemes open at the same time. There is no change to the eligibility requirements for UK-born children in this regard.

Ending use of open-ended permission to travel letters

Additionally, we are ending the use of permission to travel letters in the Ukraine schemes. PTT letters were issued as part of an exceptional biometric deferral application process, implemented in response to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, to allow those fleeing war to quickly reach sanctuary in the UK. However, this process closed to new applicants on 7 December 2023, and all Ukraine scheme applicants are now required to attend a visa application centre to provide their biometrics before travelling.

We have provided advanced notice to applicants who have been issued with a PTT letter but not yet travelled to the UK, to ensure that any individual who wishes to use it has the opportunity to do so before restrictions take effect. Any applicants who have not travelled to the UK when the restrictions take effect will be informed that their PTT letters can no longer be used. The Homes for Ukraine scheme will remain open and uncapped for those who wish to reapply for sanctuary in the UK. This change is therefore not a reduction of support for Ukraine, and the UK Government remain steadfast in their support for Ukraine and the Ukrainian people.

Changes to long residence route

We have always been clear that the Ukraine schemes provide temporary sanctuary in the UK only while the war in Ukraine remains ongoing, and that they are not a route to settlement in the UK. This is in line with the express wishes of the Ukrainian Government, who will need their nationals to return to help rebuild the country when it is safe to do so. To reflect this, we are making a minor change to the eligibility requirements for the long residence route, to make it clear that permission to stay in the UK under the Ukraine schemes, including the new UPE, cannot be used to qualify for permission to stay or settlement under the long residence route. This change brings the rules in step with the already established policy position.

These changes to the immigration rules are being laid on 26 November 2024. On the changes that introduce a visa requirement on Colombia, due to the need to safeguard the operation of the UK's immigration system, those changes will come into effect at 15:00 GMT on 26 November 2024.

The changes regarding the long residence route will come into effect on 18 December 2024; the changes to open the Ukraine permission extension scheme and close the Ukraine extension scheme will come into effect on 4 February 2025; and the changes to end the use of open-ended permission to travel letters will come into effect on 13 February 2025.

[HCWS250]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Older People's Housing Taskforce

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government have today published the report of the older people's housing taskforce. Copies will also be deposited in the House Library.

Concluding in May 2024, the older people's housing taskforce undertook an assessment of public and private specialised and supported older people's housing, with a particular focus on the private market for those on middle incomes, and explored options for the provision of greater choice, quality and security of housing for older people. There is rightly significant national interest in the taskforce's findings.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the chair of the taskforce, Professor Julianne Meyer, and all its members for producing such a comprehensive, detailed and well-researched report. I would also like to express my gratitude to the many stakeholders who contributed to the work of the taskforce.

The Government recognise the importance of increased supply and improving the housing options for older people in later life, and we will give careful consideration to the many recommendations set out in the report.

Providing a range of safe, suitable housing for older people in later life helps them live independently, safely and well, for longer. It can enhance the wellbeing of our senior citizens and reduce demand on adult social care

services and the national health service. The Government have committed to building 1.5 million new homes over the next five years, including those to meet the needs of older people, and we will consider this issue further as we develop our long-term housing strategy.

We are determined to create a more diverse housing market; one that delivers homes quickly and responds to the needs of a range of communities. Through the recent consultation on proposed reforms to the national planning policy framework, we tested proposals to promote the delivery of mixed-use sites, including housing designed for specific groups such as older people. We have also indicated our intention to consider further planning policy changes in the future as we move to produce a more streamlined and accessible suite of policies, and we will ensure that considerations around older people's housing inform our approach.

We are also working with the Planning Advisory Service to meet the recommendation of the taskforce for guidance to provide more clarity on how planning use classes apply to specialist older people's housing.

As the report also makes clear, older people's housing has not been immune to the challenges faced by other residential leaseholders across the country. The Government remain fully committed to providing homeowners with greater rights, powers and protections over their homes by quickly implementing the provisions of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024.

We will also take further steps over the Parliament to bring the feudal leasehold system to an end, including reinvigorating commonhold by modernising the legal framework as well as restricting the sale of new leasehold flats. We will consult on the best way to achieve this, and consider the needs of all parts of the housing market as we do this, including older people's housing.

The Government are committed to helping older people to live comfortably and independently at home for as long as possible. The Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), and I thank the taskforce for their important contribution to this agenda.

[HCWS249]

WORK AND PENSIONS

"Get Britain Working" White Paper

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): Today, the Government have published the "Get Britain Working" White Paper—bringing forward the biggest reforms to employment support in a generation, and turning a Department of welfare into a genuine Department for work. This takes the first steps towards delivering our bold ambition of an 80% employment rate, through a decade of national renewal.

The UK is the only country in the G7 whose employment rate has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. We have a near-record 2.8 million people out of work due to long-term sickness or disability. Almost a million young people are not in education, employment or training. Millions are stuck in low paid, insecure work.

To turn the page on this, nothing short of a fundamentally different approach is needed. Our White Paper brings in three major reforms to:

Create a new jobs and careers service, overhauling jobcentres from a one-size-fits-all service that overwhelmingly focuses on administering benefits into a genuine public employment service providing personalised help and support. We will bring jobcentres together with the National Careers Service in England, beginning with a pathfinder early next year. We will work closely with mayors and local leaders to ensure the new service is rooted in local communities and properly joined up with local health and skills support. We will work closely with employers, so that it better meets their needs. We will also test, trial and develop a radically improved digital offer, using the latest technologies and AI to provide up-to-date information on jobs, skills and other support, and to free up work coach time. This is backed with £55 million of initial funding.

Establish a new youth guarantee in England to ensure that every young person is earning or learning. We will bring together all the different support for 18 to 21-year-olds, under the leadership of mayors and local areas, to ensure that all young people have access to education, training, and employment opportunities once they reach 18, and that no one misses out. Backed with £45 million of funding, we have announced eight trailblazers for our youth guarantee—in Liverpool City Region, the West Midlands, Tees Valley, East Midlands, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, West of England, and two areas in Greater London. We have also announced a new national partnership to provide exciting new opportunities for young people in sports, arts and culture. We will invest in young people and give them the choices and chances that they deserve, but in return, they will have a responsibility to take up the training or work that is on offer.

Address the growing and unsustainable problem of people being out of work due to poor health. We are already taking action to drive down waiting lists, including with targeted support at the 20 NHS trusts with the highest economic inactivity. We are joining up employment and health support, for example by expanding individual placement support and piloting new WorkWell services. However, we need to go much further and faster to tackle this issue.

To meet the scale of the challenge, we will devolve new funding, powers and responsibilities to tackle economic inactivity to mayors and local areas. Because local leaders know their communities best, we will support all areas in England to produce local “Get Britain Working” plans, joining up work, health and skills support. Today we have announced eight trailblazers, backed by £125 million of funding—in West Yorkshire, North East, South Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, Wales, York and North Yorkshire, and two Greater London areas. To kick-start this work, we are funding a new

supported employment programme called “Connect to Work”—backed by £115 million of initial funding for next year.

Alongside this action, we have announced an independent “Keep Britain Working” review. This will look at the role of UK employers and Government in tackling health-related economic inactivity and creating and maintaining healthy workplaces. This will be led by the former chair of John Lewis, Sir Charlie Mayfield, and will report in the autumn.

And we will bring forward in the spring a Green Paper setting out proposals on reforming the health and disability benefits system. This will ensure that disabled people and those with health conditions have the same rights and opportunities as everybody else, including the right to work; that they are treated with dignity and respect; and that the system responds to the complex and fluctuating nature of the health conditions that so many people are living with today. We will work closely with disabled people and representative organisations as we develop our proposals.

Many of the policy areas described in this White Paper are devolved in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Where this is the case, the focus of this paper is on the actions that the UK Government will take in England. The UK Government will work closely with the devolved Governments to maximise positive outcomes and learning across the UK, while respecting devolution settlements. Within Great Britain, we will work with the Scottish and Welsh Government to ensure that all aspects of our new approach to delivering employment support partner effectively with devolved provision. That includes, but is not limited to, skills, health and careers, as well as Scottish and Welsh Government funded employment support.

To deliver change, we need action across Government, which is why this White Paper has been developed with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Education, and with input from the Department for Health and Social Care and many other Departments.

Our “Get Britain Working” White Paper brings forward the real reforms needed to help more people into better jobs, to give young people the chance of a better life, and to make sure that our employment and social security system understands that a healthy nation and a healthy economy are two sides of the same coin. This is how we get Britain working again, and how we get Britain growing again.

[HCWS252]

Written Correction

Tuesday 26 November 2024

Ministerial Correction

TRANSPORT

Bus Franchising

The following extract is from Transport Questions on 21 November 2024.

Gareth Bacon:... On Monday, in her statement on bus funding, the Secretary of State said that a formula was being used to allocate funding. She said that the formula will allocate funding

“based on local need, population, the distance that buses travel, and levels of deprivation... This formula and the funding allocated

is a fair arrangement, ensuring that every area of the country gets the service levels it needs”.—[*Official Report*, 18 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 43-45.]

The formula, including the weighting given to the various factors by the right hon. Lady, has not been published. When will it be?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his question. We are proud of the work that we have done to ensure that every part of the country benefits from additional funding for their buses, and we will publish that later today.

[*Official Report*, 21 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 352.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood):

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his question. We are proud of the work that we have done to ensure that every part of the country benefits from additional funding for their buses, and we will **provide further details in due course.**

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