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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 10 December 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Prolific Offenders

1. **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle hyper-prolific offenders. [901714]

11. **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle hyper-prolific offenders. [901732]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): We know that prolific offenders represent only 10% of offenders but account for nearly 50% of all sentences. That clearly cannot continue, which is why I have specifically asked David Gauke to look at this issue in the independent sentencing review, to ensure that we have fewer crimes committed by prolific criminals.

Sir Ashley Fox: I am grateful to the Lord Chancellor for her answer. Can she tell the House what data her Department holds on the nationality of prolific offenders, and what steps she will take to deport those who are non-British?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member will know that we retain data on foreign national offenders, and this Government are on track to remove more foreign national offenders this year than in the previous year. I obviously want to make further progress on this issue, and I hope that there will be consensus across the House so that we remove those who commit crimes in this country and who have no right to be here.

Joe Robertson: The Government's early release scheme has an impact assessment for it to run for 10 years. For however long it does run, will the Government confirm that no prolific offenders will be released early?

Shabana Mahmood: The impact assessment is done over the usual period of time, but I have committed to review the policy 18 months from the moment it was brought in, which is a commitment that we will keep. I recognise that we have a problem with prolific offending.

It has gone up over the last decade or so, which is why I have specifically asked the sentencing review panel to consider the interventions that we should make to cut the cycle of prolific offending.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Retail workers in my constituency tell me that they can predict, almost to the week, when somebody will arrive at their store to begin shoplifting again after their oftentimes all-too-short sentence. Does my right hon. Friend agree with them that the solution to hyper-prolific offending must be longer sentences in certain cases?

Shabana Mahmood: The length of sentences, and how to deal with the problem of prolific offending, will be looked at specifically by the independent sentencing review panel. My hon. Friend will understand why I cannot pre-empt the findings of that review, but he will note that this Government are committed to scrapping the effective immunity for some shoplifting, which was introduced by the previous Conservative Government, by removing the £200 threshold. That shows that we are determined to clamp down on the sort of shoplifting he describes.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): We know that one of the key ways in which we manage prolific offenders is through tagging—both GPS tagging and home detention tagging. The Secretary of State has assured us that the problems with early release tagging have now been resolved, but I understand that problems persist for thousands of other prisoners who are due to be tagged. Can she assure the public that everyone who is being released, and who should be getting a tag, is being tagged on time?

Shabana Mahmood: Yes. The specific problem that the hon. Gentleman refers to, which relates to Serco's performance and the two tranches of SDS40 releases, has now been resolved. The backlog has been cleared, and Serco's performance is now back to where it should be. Of course, we will continue to monitor Serco's overall performance and keep the contract under regular review.

Dr Mullan: The House will have heard that the Secretary of State did not answer my question. I acknowledge that the problems with the early release scheme have been tackled, but I am told by many people working in the criminal justice sector that there are many other delays with the thousands of other prisoners who are due to be tagged. Again, can she assure the House that the thousands of prisoners who are due to be tagged are being tagged on time?

Shabana Mahmood: Yes. There are no additional issues in relation to tagging or the process by which the tagging takes place with Serco, but where there is contract failure by Serco, we will not hesitate to take action. We have already imposed financial penalties for the things that went wrong with the SDS40 releases, and we will keep this issue under regular review. The Prisons Minister in the other place discusses these matters directly with Serco on a regular basis, as do my officials, and we will continue to monitor the situation.

Prison Conditions

2. **Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the condition of prisons. [901718]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): The prison estate conditions survey programme is a live assessment of the condition of our estate, but there is still much to do. Approximately 4,000 cells were lost to dilapidation under the last Government. That is why we are investing £220 million in Prison and Probation Service maintenance in 2024-25, and up to £300 million in 2025-26.

Bobby Dean: A constituent who is now a prisoner of HMP Coldingley wrote to me recently about the appalling conditions in his prison. He spoke about the prevalence of drugs, violence, discrimination and denial of access to healthcare. In his most recent letter to me, he said that the conditions had got so bad that he made an attempt on his life. Another report on Coldingley has described the conditions as “inhumane”. Can the Minister tell me what urgent work is being done to ensure that all our prisons have humane conditions for prisoners?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: This Government are determined to ensure the best possible conditions in our prisons. We have inherited a crisis in our prisons, I am afraid, but if the hon. Member wishes to write to me about that particular issue, I will be happy to write back to him.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The condition of our Victorian prisons in particular is not conducive to rehabilitation or preparation for life on release. The Government are pressing ahead with the construction of 20,000 new prison places, which their predecessors failed to honour. What thought has been given, in the design and operation of these major new prisons, to the training, education, addiction and mental health needs of inmates, for whom prison is currently little more than a human warehouse?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: These new prisons will be built with all the things my hon. Friend mentions taken fully into account. The Government are determined to put in place 14,000 more prison places.

Violence against Women and Girls

3. **Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking through the criminal justice system to help tackle violence against women and girls. [901720]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): Last week, this Government introduced domestic abuse protection orders in selected areas. This will improve protection for victims of domestic abuse, including non-physical abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour. We have also committed to fast-tracking rape cases through the courts in order to deliver swift justice for victims of this abhorrent offence.

Elaine Stewart: I recently visited South Ayrshire Women's Aid in my constituency as part of the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. Will the Minister join me in praising the hard work of Women's Aid in supporting women and girls who have suffered violence? Does she agree that we need more support for these organisations up and down the country, particularly in respect of reliable funding?

Alex Davies-Jones: I wholeheartedly echo my hon. Friend's words about the vital work of organisations such as Women's Aid, who do such brilliant work in empowering women and children to rebuild their lives after experiencing domestic abuse. This Government are committed to halving violence against women and girls within a decade. That is why I have decided to protect violence against women and girls victims spending in the Ministry of Justice by maintaining the current funding levels for sexual violence and domestic abuse support for the next financial year.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): In August 2008, Alan Jerney brutally murdered Kirsty Wilson, strangling her and setting her body on fire while their two young daughters slept upstairs. He has now been recommended for transfer to an open prison, which could allow him unchaperoned access to the community within six months. His daughters, now 18 and 23, are my constituents, and they are terrified by the thought of encountering him, or worse, of him coming to their home, as he knows their address. Will the Lord Chancellor meet me and these young women to discuss their fears and ensure that this transfer is stopped?

Alex Davies-Jones: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman and his constituents to discuss the case.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of increased reports of internet image abuse and the rise of deepfake pornography. What is her Department doing to ensure that women and girls are safe online and that this modern form of abuse can be prevented?

Alex Davies-Jones: This Government share the concern that more needs to be done to protect women from this appalling form of abuse. That is why we made a clear commitment in our manifesto to criminalise the creation of sexually explicit deepfake images of adults, and I look forward to setting out our position on this in more detail soon.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Four schoolgirls suffered sexual abuse by their headteacher, Neil Foden, who was sentenced in July to 17 years with a two-thirds tariff. The Crown Prosecution Service now tells me that Foden will instead spend half his sentence in prison, because the most serious of his crimes can only be sentenced to 14 years. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how to safeguard the victims, whose abuser was in a position of trust, because they live in fear of his early release?

Alex Davies-Jones: I am aware of the appalling case that the right hon. Lady mentions. It is horrific and all my thoughts are with the victims of those crimes. If she wants to write to me with more details, I will happily look at the case. As she knows, sentencing is a matter for the independent judiciary, but I will look at the case and meet her to discuss it further.

Prisoner Rehabilitation

4. **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to equip prisoners with the skills they need to support their rehabilitation. [901721]

7. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps she is taking to help ensure that prisoners are prepared for life outside of prison before they are released. [901725]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): We are mandating careers advice in prisons and introducing a life skills curriculum. All released prisoners have access to an employment advisory board that can connect prisoners with work, and banking and ID administrators are preparing prisoners for life after prison.

Paul Davies: The UK faces a major labour shortage that is costing billions of pounds annually. Lacking prospects, many ex-prisoners return to a life of crime. Enhancing prisoner literacy and numeracy and providing vocational training can help equip them with skills for employment, leading to a reduction in reoffending rates. I welcome the “Get Britain Working” White Paper, which will address the issue. Does the Minister agree that failing to tackle the issue will not only cause a lifelong challenge for individuals, but create a significant problem for the state, including lost opportunities and increased crime?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I agree with my hon. Friend. We know that having a job and a home are the best ways to reduce reoffending. That is why we have employment hubs in all resettlement prisons, where prisoners can access job vacancies and support with their applications.

Bob Blackman: The Minister will know that prison governors have a statutory duty to ensure that prisoners are prepared for life outside prison before their release. One of the main issues for released prisoners is finding a secure home, so that they can have somewhere secure to live rather than going back to the place where they were probably involved in gangs or with particular individuals. Now that prisoners are being released from their sentences early, what action is the Minister taking to ensure that they are fully prepared for life outside prison and there is no risk that they will reoffend?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We know that accommodation is key to reducing reoffending. That is why we are expanding our transitional accommodation service and working closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to develop a long-term strategy to put us back on track to ending homelessness and ensuring this issue is tackled correctly.

Legislation on Funerals

5. **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of legislation on funerals. [901722]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): The Government recognise that there are serious concerns about the funeral director sector and that the legislation that governs what happens

after we die is outdated. We are considering how to ensure that appropriate standards are introduced, including through the potential for some form of regulation. We have asked the Law Commission to create a future-proof legal framework to address what happens to our bodies after we die.

Dr Luke Evans: As the Minister knows, we have been in correspondence about that sector. She kindly wrote back to me to say that the Fuller inquiry’s phase 2 interim report has been released. My constituent Joseph Barsby runs G. Seller, one the biggest independent funeral directors. He is passionate about how we can bring forward a compassionate way of looking at people who have died, while ensuring that standards are kept high. Will the Minister consider meeting me and him to further discuss ways that we can bring the sector into the 21st century?

Alex Davies-Jones: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the vast majority of funeral directors treat people in their care with the utmost respect, as that business in his constituency will do. Nevertheless, there are some serious issues of concern in the sector. As I mentioned, the Government are currently considering the full range of possible next steps, including meeting with sector directors. I would be happy to inform the hon. Gentleman when that meeting is taking place, so that he and his constituent can take part.

Support for Victims of Ecocide

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we come to question 6, I notice that it was grouped, but to be honest I cannot see a relationship between the questions or why they were grouped together. I hope a message can be passed back to the Department to say that we need to have relevance in the way questions are grouped.

6. **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): What steps her Department is taking through the criminal justice system to help support victims of ecocide. [901723]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): The victims code sets out the services and support that victims of crime are entitled to receive from the criminal justice system in England and Wales. That includes the right to access support, which applies regardless of whether they decide to report the crime directly to the police. We provide police and crime commissioners with annual grant funding to commission local, practical, emotional, and therapeutic support services for all victims of crime.

Dr Chambers: England is home to 85% of the world’s chalk streams, which are very rare habitats. In Winchester we are lucky to have the Rivers Itchen and Meon running through the constituency. We know that they are struggling, with only 17% of chalk streams rated as having good ecological health. That is partly because of over-abstraction, partly because of pollution, and partly because of water companies dumping sewage in them. We know that that not only destroys biodiversity but makes people who swim in it sick. Will the Minister, in addition to coming down harder on water companies, commit to implementing a sewage victims compensation scheme for that particular problem?

Alex Davies-Jones: I will ensure that the hon. Member's comments are passed to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Minister responsible for water quality. I can confirm that we are committed to delivering for nature, taking action to meet our targets in the Environment Act 2021, and that we work in partnership with civil society, communities and businesses to restore and protect our natural world.

Reducing Reoffending

8. Mr Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce reoffending. [901727]

15. Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce reoffending. [901736]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): We will expand our transitional accommodation service and launch employment councils to strengthen the relationship between employers and HM Prison and Probation Service.

Mr Swards: People who commit crimes should be prosecuted and put in prison as quickly as possible. It is also clear that we need to do more to reduce reoffending rates in order to keep the public safe. To keep up with the current demand for prison places, we need to build three mega-jails a year, costing the taxpayer millions. Given those facts, does the Minister agree that we need to invest in technology to bring reoffending rates down, so that we can help those people turn their lives around and, crucially, keep the public safe?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Absolutely; public safety is our No. 1 priority and new technology gives us every advantage to do things differently. That is one of the things that the independent sentencing review under David Gauke will be looking at.

Dan Aldridge: Providing quality education and training for offenders is one of the most effective ways of reducing reoffending. Weston College in Weston-super-Mare runs a transformational prison education programme across the south-west of England, which supports successful rehabilitation, resettlement and employment of offenders on release. Can the Minister advise what steps the Department is taking to ensure that more offenders can develop the skills they need to successfully gain employment and reintegrate into society?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I very much welcome the work that Weston College does in prisons. We are also developing our training offer for employers in areas such as rail tracks and construction, and HMPPS's Creating future opportunities programme is working to improve the employability of offenders in both prison and the community.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I declare an interest as the founder and chairman of a prison rehabilitation charity. The Minister has helpfully set out what the Government are doing about reducing reoffending, which I welcome. Is he aware, though, of the enormous pressure put on prisoners who are approaching the end

of their release, given the pressures that the prison service is under? That is partly because of early release itself, which is releasing prisoners before they finish programmes provided by charities or the prisons, but also because of the churn of prisoners being shipped around the prison system because of the pressure on that system. Is there anything he can tell us about what the Government are doing to ensure that prisoners approaching the end of their sentence have some stability in the prison they are serving in so that they can get support as they approach release?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Several of the things that I have mentioned already are designed to do exactly that, and we recognise exactly what the hon. Gentleman says. On the SDS40 scheme, prison and probation officers have done an outstanding job in supporting prisoners through that journey.

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): A constituent of mine reported a rape and sexual offence case well over two years ago but, like many victims, is still waiting for her case to be processed by the Crown court, leaving her pessimistic about the criminal justice system's ability properly to tackle violence against women and girls. What is the Ministry of Justice doing to tackle the backlog and support victims of VAWG through the criminal justice system?

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not relevant to the question that has been asked.

Prison Capacity

9. Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase prison capacity. [901728]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): We took immediate action to prevent the collapse of the prison system by changing the automatic release point for standard determinate sentences. We are building 14,000 new prison places and we will publish our 10-year capacity strategy shortly, which will set out exactly where and by when we will get the places that we need. The previous Government left prisons in crisis. We will fix them for good with that capacity strategy and the independent review of sentencing.

Patrick Spencer: I welcome what this Government are doing to increase prison capacity, but what will the Secretary of State do on tougher sentencing? If she goes to my constituency of Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, she will be met with a tough, gruff East Anglian accent that says, "What's the point of building prison places if you are not going to use them?"

Shabana Mahmood: I am sure the hon. Member's constituents will also recognise that, even with the new supply that we are building, we will still run out of prison places, as the demand in the system is much greater than the building planned. We simply cannot build our way out of this problem, so to make sure that there is always a prison place for the people who need to be locked up and that we never run out of prison places again, we need an independent review of sentencing.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The Lady Chief Justice has said that the courts are not operating at full capacity, perpetuating the record numbers in prison on remand, awaiting trial. There could be an extra 6,500 sitting days if the Government allowed them. Cases such as rape and sexual assault are being pushed into 2027. Baroness Carr warned the Justice Secretary that failure to maximise judicial capacity would actually cost the Government more in costly and limited prison places, yet the Justice Secretary failed to agree to her request. Why are the Government letting out criminals rather than hearing more cases?

Shabana Mahmood: I am tempted to remind the shadow Minister about his own Government's track record. He ought to know that it was my predecessor, his colleague, the former Lord Chancellor who agreed the allocation of sitting days with the Lady Chief Justice and that that concordat agreement was concluded during the election period when the Tories were still conducting business. When the right hon. Gentleman responds, perhaps he would like to explain why the allocation was made for only 106,000 sitting days. What I have done is increase sitting days by a further 500 and increase magistrate courts' sentencing powers, which is the equivalent of an additional 2,000 Crown court sitting days, in order to start cracking down on that backlog.

Robert Jenrick: Instead of increasing sitting hours, the Justice Secretary's defining intervention in her five months in office has been to accidentally let out dangerous criminals from our prisons. Just last week, she rushed to Parliament to close loopholes that she created for stalking, for disclosing private sexual images and for murder. She could be signing deals with other countries to get new prisoner transport agreements. She could be using visa sanctions with foreign countries to force them to take back the 10,000 foreign criminals in our prisons. She is not doing so. Meanwhile, criminals are being released and are reoffending already. Will the Justice Secretary commit now to ending her dangerous and unnecessary early release scheme?

Shabana Mahmood: The shadow Minister could at least have apologised to the country for being part of a Government and a party that ran out of prison places. It was the Tory party that ran the system at boiling hot—at over 99% capacity. I hate to remind him, but for months before the previous election, the Tory party operated its own emergency release scheme, which did not have any exclusions for offences connected to domestic abuse. I will take no lessons from him, as it is this Government who are cleaning up the mess that his party left behind.

Crown Court Backlog

10. **Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to reduce the backlog of Crown court cases. [901730]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): The Crown court backlog that we inherited from the Conservatives was dire. Instead of cutting the number of cases waiting to be heard, as they promised,

the backlog of cases exploded under their watch. This Government are getting a grip of the problem. We have taken important first steps. We have funded 106,500 Crown court sitting days this year, and we have increased magistrates' sentencing powers to free up more sitting days in the Crown court to hear the most serious cases, but we know that there is more to do.

Luke Myer: I am campaigning to put more police on our streets, but that is only part of the picture. This backlog in our courts means that the entire criminal justice system is creaking and justice is being delayed. This time last year, there was a backlog in my region of more than 9,000 cases. Will the Minister ensure that this Conservative court chaos is dealt with and offenders are brought to justice?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to describe the situation as Conservative court chaos. Indeed, the full picture of the last Government's terrible inheritance will become clear when we publish Crown court data later this week. Demand on the criminal courts is increasing at a faster rate than the actions we are able to take, and we must therefore go further. This Government understand the scale of the problem and are ready to confront it with the fundamental reforms that will be necessary.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The Minister referred to court chaos. A tribunal judge and a court worker from my Taunton and Wellington constituency wrote to me. The tribunal judge said:

"tribunals are being cancelled every day as they say there are not enough judges to cover the cases. This is absolutely not the case," and

"People are waiting months for their benefit appeals in appalling poverty and again we cannot deal with the cases because of this limit"

on sitting days. What will the Minister do to increase sitting days in Taunton and Somerset courts?

Sarah Sackman: We are investing in increased court capacity and in the recruitment of 1,000 judges and tribunal members. As the Lord Chancellor said, we have increased the number of Crown court sitting days by 500, but it is not simply enough to increase court sitting days. We have to look at fundamental reform to address the serious backlogs we have inherited from the Conservative Government.

Gambling-related Crime: Support for Victims

12. **Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): What steps her Department is taking through the criminal justice system to help support victims of gambling-related crimes. [901733]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): The Government are determined to provide support for all victims of crime. That includes publicly consulting on a new revised victims code in the new year. I remind the hon. Member that the Minister for Gambling in the other place recently announced a legally mandated levy on gambling companies to address gambling harm and to introduce NHS-led treatment and support.

Shockat Adam: I welcome that response from the Minister. Gambling addiction destroys lives. In fact, on average, 496 gambling-related suicides occur every year. It is not just the lives of the gamblers that get destroyed; there is an invisible group of victims—the families who have to pick up the pieces. A local charity in my constituency—Spinney Hill drugs, alcohol and addiction support—told me of a talented young man from a deprived socioeconomic background whose family saved every single penny to send him to university. He spent that and more on gambling because of his addiction. The family are now in spiralling debt, and the whole family unit has been destroyed. Does the Minister agree that gambling companies should pay a levy to help compensate families, especially when children are becoming addicted?

Alex Davies-Jones: The Government recently announced a mandatory levy on the companies directly to provide support and NHS-led services. I will pass his comments to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to give him an answer.

Court Cases: Backlog

13. **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the backlog of court cases on victims of crime. [901734]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): Bearing down on the outstanding caseload in the Crown court and bringing down waiting times is a priority for the Government. We want to ensure that every victim has the swift access to justice that they deserve. We know rape victims are waiting a disproportionately long time for their trials, and that is why we have committed to working with the judiciary to fast-track those cases through the courts.

Rebecca Smith: Recently, Truro Crown court, which serves my constituency of South West Devon, has been forced to shut one day a week due to recent budget cuts and the judicial sitting day reductions. Some cases have already been postponed until late 2025, including lengthy cases that involve victims of violence, and it is prompting those victims to consider withdrawing their cases. Given the maxim justice delayed is justice denied, what additional steps are being taken to support victims to continue with their cases across Devon and Cornwall?

Alex Davies-Jones: As the hon. Lady knows, rape is an abhorrent crime and cases are usually complex. That means despite judges prioritising cases involving vulnerable complainants and witnesses, rape victims can wait disproportionately longer than victims of other cases for their trial to come to court. I remind her that the Government have increased the number of court sitting dates by 500 days this year, and the Lord Chancellor agreed to increase capacity in the magistrates courts so that we can get through cases more quickly. We are also introducing independent legal advocates in the new year to advise rape victims from report to trial, which will ensure they stay in the system longer, feel supported and get to trial.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): In the last five years, the number of magistrates covering Telford and wider Shropshire fell from 91 to 76. In 2022, 50% of the court sessions went unused. At the Crown court, victims are

waiting an average of 18 months, with some sexual offences taking up to three years to be dealt with. Telford voted for change. Will the Minister ensure that victims of crime get justice and that criminals are punished?

Alex Davies-Jones: Absolutely. The Minister with responsibility for courts, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman), has already outlined the steps that the Government are taking to increase sentencing in our courts. We will of course consider what other action we can take. We know that the budgetary position that the Government face is incredibly tight, because of the inheritance that we received. However, it is vital that we make fiscally responsible decisions.

Early Release Scheme

14. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the early release scheme. [901735]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): SDS40—the standard determinate sentences early release scheme—was an emergency measure that we had to take to avert the complete collapse of the criminal justice system following the shocking inheritance left to us by the previous Government. The emergency measure is not, of course, the solution to the crisis that we inherited. That is why we will build the 14,000 prison places that we need, and have launched the independent review of sentencing.

Sir Edward Leigh: What concerns me is not the past but the future and how to protect the public. Will the Secretary of State assure me that the screening process is sufficiently robust to ensure that violent and dangerous criminals are not released into the community?

Shabana Mahmood: I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that the past is relevant in so far as it sets the context for the crisis that we have inherited, which needs resolving. Given that we all but ran out of prison places—numbers had fallen to fewer than 100 in the summer—it is important that we recognise that the prison system is and has been on the point of collapse. That is why we had to take emergency measures. We have made exclusions to the SDS40 scheme that should take account of his concerns. It is of course important that offenders are monitored and supervised effectively when they are not in prison, and that is what we are trying to do now. Tech can play a bigger role there, and I have asked the independent review into sentencing to look into that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): There are no specific domestic abuse offences in law, so abusers hiding behind convictions such as actual bodily harm are being let out early under the SDS40 early release scheme. That is not right, so I have introduced the Domestic Abuse (Aggravated Offences) Bill to create a specific set of domestic abuse aggravated offences—a bit like racially aggravated offences—that could be excluded from early release schemes. Women's Aid is backing my Bill; will the Secretary of State back it, too?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman is right to note that, under current legislation, it is possible to exclude only offences, rather than classes of offender. I am sure that his Bill will gain some interest across the House. If any such changes were to be made, they would be for the future, as they do not help us with the current crisis. I will ensure to discuss the details of his Bill with the Home Secretary.

Josh Babarinde: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer—I hope to have the chance to meet her to discuss it in more detail. The Liberal Democrats are deeply concerned about survivors who have been told that, as it stands, their abuser is set to be released early. One such survivor is Elizabeth Hudson, who I met on the set of “Good Morning Britain” today when launching this campaign. She has written to Ministers about her concerns, but says that she has not received a response. Will the Secretary of State meet Elizabeth and me to discuss her case and how survivors can be respected and protected?

Shabana Mahmood: I believe that all who have written have received a response from the Ministry, but I will chase down that specific case. The way we implemented the policy meant that we were able to give the Probation Service time to prepare which was not available to it under the previous Tory Government’s end of custody supervised licence scheme. That means that all victims who were supposed to be notified under the victim contact scheme have been notified.

Epilepsy: Sudden Unexpected Death

16. **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): What discussions she has had with the chief coroner on reporting sudden unexpected death in epilepsy. [901737]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): I recently met the chief coroner. We did not discuss the specifics of this issue, but coroners have a statutory duty to investigate deaths that are not reported to them if they suspect that the cause is unknown, violent or unnatural, or that the death occurred in custody or other state detention.

Olly Glover: The charity SUDEP Action, which is based in my Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage, provides specialist support for bereaved families. Improvements to the coroner service would help to reduce trauma, improve understanding of the causes of death, and enable more research to aid prevention of future deaths. Will the Minister press for more investment in, and support for, the coroner service?

Alex Davies-Jones: The Government recognise the impact of delays and the other issues facing coroners at the moment, and the impact that that is having on bereaved families and the wider systems. We welcome the recent Justice Committee report on the coroner service, and I look forward to working closely with the chief coroner, local authorities and key partners to devise and deliver a wider strategy for those services.

Prison Maintenance

17. **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of insourcing all prison maintenance. [901738]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): My hon. Friend is right to ask this question. Under the previous Government, a process was already under way to put in place new contracts for prison maintenance. We need to make sure that those contracts deliver good value for the public purse.

Kim Johnson: I thank the Minister for that response. The prison maintenance contract is set to be retendered to the private sector next year. Prisons such as Walton in my home city of Liverpool—a crumbling Victorian prison—struggle to get the smallest repairs undertaken, and there is £1.8 billion-worth of unreported repairs within the prison system. We know that privatisation leads to higher costs and increased squalor, so can the Minister or the Secretary of State call time on this failed experiment and bring prison maintenance back in-house where it belongs?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The previous Government paused work on essential maintenance, which has added to the problems we are now dealing with. My hon. Friend is right to say that all options need to be looked at in order to ensure we get the best possible value for money for the public purse from any new contracts or arrangements.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for that response. One story that has been quite prevalent in the press over the past two months has been the amount of mould growth in prisons, which will obviously lead to health issues. Will the new prison maintenance service that the Minister has referred to be able to deal with that specific issue? If it is not dealt with, it will lead to ill health among those who are in prison.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Clearly, issues such as that need to be dealt with. Staff at His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service are doing their utmost to try to tackle those issues, but we will redouble our efforts after the hon. Gentleman’s encouragement.

Topical Questions

T1. [901740] **Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): Last week, the National Audit Office released a damning report on the previous Government’s record on prison building, showing that their promise of 20,000 prison places by the mid-2020s was hollow. Unwilling to face down opposition on their own Back Benches, the last Government dithered and delayed, ultimately building less than a third of the cells they promised. As a result, they left our prisons overcrowded and at the point of collapse. Later this week, I will set out in my 10-year capacity strategy a realistic plan for building the 14,000 prison places that we need, and I will ensure that our prisons are never left at the point of collapse again.

Antonia Bance: I thank the Justice Secretary for that answer. In common with many Members of the House, I have heard horrific stories of perpetrators breaching orders to which they are subject, giving them further opportunity to terrorise, injure, or in some cases kill women protected by those orders—may Harshita Brella and so many others rest in peace. What action is the Justice Secretary taking to assess and improve the effectiveness of civil orders in safeguarding survivors of domestic abuse?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend will know that this Government have launched a pilot of domestic abuse protection orders in a number of areas, which will bring together the strongest possible protections for victims in other existing protective orders into a single order. Breaching such orders will be a criminal offence punishable by up to five years in prison, and unlike other orders, there will be no maximum duration.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): In London, there is a phone theft epidemic, and this time it is not the former Transport Secretary on the loose. Last year, more than 64,000 mobile phones were reported to the police as stolen in the capital alone. The small number of individuals responsible should be locked up for a long time, yet last month, a criminal who used a motorbike to steal 24 phones an hour was jailed for just two years. Enough is enough, so will the Justice Secretary commit to dramatically increasing sentences for career criminals, get them off our streets and slash crime?

Shabana Mahmood: Where was the shadow Secretary of State over the past 14 years when the theft epidemic began? Again, given the scale of his party's general election defeat, some humility is usually required—perhaps even an apology to the British public—before he and others can earn the right to be heard again. He is right about the issues with mobile phone theft, and the Home Office and the Home Secretary in particular are meeting with tech companies to talk about how we can break the business model of those criminals.

Robert Jenrick: Cousin marriage has absolutely no place in Britain. The medical evidence is overwhelming that it significantly increases the risk of birth defects, and the moral case is clear in that we see hundreds of exploitative marriages that ruin lives. Frankly, it should have been stamped out a long time ago. Will the Justice Secretary commit to ending this medieval practice, which is rearing its head once again in modern Britain?

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Member will know that there has been a recent Law Commission report on marriage law more generally. The Government are going to consult on broader reform of marriage law, and we will certainly consider the issues that he has raised before setting out a public position.

T2. [901741] **Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab):** Many of my constituents work at HMP Swinfen Hall in Staffordshire, although the boundary changes took it out of my constituency recently. Many of the prison officers I speak to there are concerned about retention at the start of their careers, getting into more experienced

roles and ensuring that such experience is retained. Can the Minister reassure me about the steps being taken to encourage retention of experienced members of staff?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): One of the very first actions of the Government was to accept the Prison Service pay review body's independent recommendations in full, delivering a pay increase of 5% for prison officers. In addition, we monitor exit interview data and use it to help design interventions to improve retention.

T3. [901742] **Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD):** One in four people of working age in the UK has a criminal record, for a variety of reasons. Most of these people no longer pose a threat to society, but are still tied to their past by their criminal record and face a lifetime of barriers with employers. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the criminal record implications of a sentence do not impact on an individual disproportionately?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member raises an important issue, which is always under review, but that is where we are at the moment.

T4. [901743] **Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab):** What are the Government doing to ensure that offenders are managed effectively in the community, and how will the Secretary of State use offender monitoring technology to improve the efficiency of the Probation Service in keeping the public safe? I particularly welcome the steps taken with technology on exclusion zones and monitoring alcohol and drugs in the human body.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend. Tagging technology can monitor offenders effectively in the community. We have tags that monitor curfews and exclusion zones, tags to impose home detention—in effect, the equivalent of house arrest—and sobriety tags with a 97% compliance rate. We are currently looking at expanding the use of technology to improve productivity in the Probation Service. We will also fund an additional 5,000 new tags to expand the use of tech outside prison.

T8. [901747] **Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con):** One in 50 Albanians in Britain is in jail, and foreign nationals such as Jamaicans, Iraqis and Somalis are also disproportionately likely to be criminals. We need better data to inform immigration, asylum and criminal justice policies. Will the Government publish the nationality, visa and asylum status of all offenders in prison—if yes, can we have a timeline, and if not, can we have a good reason why not?

Shabana Mahmood: We are currently using a data collection and publication approach inherited from the previous Conservative Government—probably from the hon. Member's time as an adviser to the former Home Secretary and Prime Minister—but I will continue to monitor the data that we collect and publish. We are committed to ensuring that we deport foreign national offenders, and are on track to deport more this year than were deported in the previous year. We will make more progress in that respect.

T5. [901744] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Like other hon. Members from south Wales, I regularly hear from constituents with relatives in Parc Prison of their concerns about safety, the state of the facilities and the difficulty of getting medication and mental health support. I know the Victims Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones)—and the Prisons Minister visited on Thursday, and I thank them for being proactive, because this has been going on a long time. Can the Minister report back on what the management are doing to improve things?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I can assure the House and my hon. Friend that HMP Parc is receiving targeted support. She points to the recent visit by my hon. and noble Friends to the prison, and the Minister for Prisons in the other place is providing full evidence about this and other matters to the Welsh Affairs Committee tomorrow.

T9. [901748] **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): Elizabeth Fry first began her work to create sex-specific prison facilities for women in 1813, with the primary aim of protecting female prisoners from rape, and the Gaols Act 1823 put this into statute. Yet 200 years later, Fry's legacy is being betrayed as girls and women continue to be housed with boys and men. One such example is Wetherby. Does the Secretary of State agree with me and the Women's Rights Network that Susannah Hancock's work on this is urgently needed, and can she give any indication of when Susannah will conclude her review?

Shabana Mahmood: There are no girls currently in Wetherby. We have not changed and will not be changing the policy we inherited from the previous Government in relation to single-sex spaces and the prison system; that policy will remain as it has been. The women's justice board will consider the issues that relate to female offenders across the women's estate.

T6. [901745] **Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): The criminal injuries compensation scheme is a vitally important part of the justice system but among the gaps in the framework we inherited is interim support for victims of crime under 18 before they can access their award. This is profoundly affecting three of my young constituents who were victims of rape, and their families, in dealing with the consequences. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can do more for child victims of the most serious offending and ensure the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority is fit for purpose?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): My hon. Friend raises an important point about the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. The previous Government undertook a review of the scheme; it ran three consultations respectively. When the election was called in May no response to those consultations had been published. We are considering the support we provide to victims including child victims, and we are advising on a new victims' code in the new year specifically to look at that issue, including any response to the review, and we will set out our plans in due course.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Since the beginning of this year, 17 inmates have died at HMP Parc. It has been under the control of G4S since opening in 1997. What consideration has the Lord Chancellor made of returning the prison to the Ministry of Justice?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: As I said in answer to an earlier question from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), HMP Parc is receiving a lot of attention at the moment. The Minister for prisons in the other place, Lord Timpson, will be answering questions tomorrow in thorough detail and the hon. Member might wish to attend that meeting.

T7. [901746] **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): Two weeks ago I visited Currys in Farnborough Gate after its staff suffered yet another horrifying steaming attack. A gang of six men stormed into the store, destroyed and stole products and terrified customers. How will the sentencing review contribute towards cracking down on this appalling behaviour trend?

Shabana Mahmood: The independent sentencing review will be making recommendations to ensure that our sentencing legislation and framework is fit for purpose and that we always have prison places for those who need to be locked up, so that our prisons create better citizens out of criminals and we can expand the use of punishment outside prison. I will not get ahead of what that review might recommend but it will look at all those issues in the round.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The smuggling of illegal drugs into prisons has been a problem for many years. The last Government spent over £100 million trying to deal with the issue; what plans do the current Government have to try to comprehensively deal with it?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman is right: drugs are rife in too many of our prisons and that problem has been very difficult to challenge, both for the previous Government and no doubt for us as well. We have to crack down on the supply of drugs into our prisons, which is why we are expanding the use of no-fly zones. The hon. Gentleman will know that scanners have already been used, but hardened criminals are increasingly moving on to using drones instead. We will crack down on supply but we also need to look at demand and getting more of our prisoners off drugs while they are in prison.

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): The current court backlog across England is an indictment of the previous Government, with almost 1,800 cases in Nottinghamshire alone. Rape victims are waiting on average over a year to have their case brought to trial, if it gets that far. What is the Department doing to prioritise these cases and restore faith in the criminal justice system for victims of rape and serious sexual offences?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): My hon. Friend is right that justice delayed is justice denied, and our hearts break for victims waiting too long for trials to come. That is why we must tackle the Crown court backlog, which we are doing by keeping

open 16 Nightingale courts through the recruitment of more judges. As I said previously, we need fundamental reform, and that is what we will bring about.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): To boost public confidence in the criminal justice system, can the Minister confirm that the Government will not resort to increased dependency on community sentences, many of which are unserved?

Shabana Mahmood: As the hon. Gentleman will have heard me say many times, we have brought forward an independent sentencing review to look at the issues of sentencing in the round to ensure that we are never again in the position where we are about to run out of prison places and cannot lock up those who must be locked up for reasons of public protection. The review will also make recommendations on how prisoner rehabilitation can help people turn their lives around and, more importantly, cut the number of victims that would result from reoffending.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): Last month in Basingstoke, three women were victims of spiking while on nights out. That appalling crime robs individuals of their autonomy, puts lives at risk and leaves women feeling unsafe. Victims, including Skylar, Laura and Jade, have highlighted serious gaps in the awareness of and response to spiking, so I welcome the Government's pledge to make spiking a specific criminal offence and to train thousands of night-time economy staff. Will the Minister update the House on how the proposed measures will be implemented to prevent further incidents in towns such as Basingstoke?

Alex Davies-Jones: This Government are committed to bringing forward a specific new offence of spiking. We are committed to modernising the existing legislation in this Session so that no other victims like Skylar, Laura and Jade suffer these abhorrent crimes.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Nearly 3,000 prisoners are still incarcerated under imprisonment for public protection sentences, which were abolished more than 12 years ago, many for offences not intended to be covered by such sentences. Will the Justice Secretary commit to expediting the Government plans to re-sentence all prisoners still stuck on indefinite IPP sentences to free up limited prison capacity?

Shabana Mahmood: First, the last Conservative Government were right to abolish the IPP sentencing regime, but that has left us with a cohort within our prison system who are still serving these sentences. I am determined to make more progress in ensuring that, when safe to do so, more of those individuals can come out of prison, but I will not do so in a way that compromises public protection, as some of these individuals pose a real risk to the public. I will not conduct a re-sentencing exercise, because that would have the effect of releasing everyone immediately, but we will make progress on getting more people properly rehabilitated and out of prison.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Section 127 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 bans prison officers from taking industrial

action and limits trade unions' ability to protect prison officers from attacks on their terms and conditions and wages. Thankfully, these fundamental trade union rights have been reinstated for prison officers in Scotland. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is time for section 127 to change so that workers' rights are fully restored for prison officers in the rest of the UK?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I do not think now is the time to consider that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Avon and Somerset police is doing an excellent job at Bath Christmas market, challenging any individual seen behaving inappropriately towards a woman or young female. What more can the Ministry of Justice do to tackle street harassment?

Alex Davies-Jones: We are working closely with our colleagues in the Home Office to tackle violence against women and girls. This Government were elected with a landmark mission to halve violence against women and girls over the course of a decade. That includes all crimes against women and girls, particularly harassment, and we are working together to ensure that that happens.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's approach in recognising that we cannot continue as we have done. She will know that county lines are having an impact in towns and cities across the country, with a particularly devastating impact on children. Can she outline the options that the sentencing review might explore to effectively disrupt the criminal networks and protect vulnerable young people?

Shabana Mahmood: The sentencing review will primarily look at the sentencing framework and how we treat different cohorts of offenders within that. It will consider drug crime, too, but on the specific issue of county lines, I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets a response from the Home Office.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Only a couple of days ago, a prisoner was let out under the Government's early release scheme. He was wanted for removing his GPS tag. What assessment has been made on the reoffending rates so far since the start of the scheme?

Shabana Mahmood: Anybody who breaches their licence conditions can be recalled immediately to prison. If somebody removes their tag, they can and will be recalled. We have not seen higher than normal rates of recall under the SDS40 scheme, and we have not changed our projections on prison capacity.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Last month, the Justice Committee visited central London county court, which is one of the busiest in England, and met the exceptional and resilient people who run it, both judicial and administrative. They need to be resilient as their work is contained in thousands of paper files that are stored, transported and updated in a way that Dickens would have recognised. When will we digitise civil justice?

Sarah Sackman: The modernisation of the courts and the digitisation programme is a priority. Clearly, that can increase efficiency in the progress of cases and improve the workings of case management. We are

looking at that and working in close co-operation with our colleagues in the judiciary to ensure that we make progress in that area.

Storm Darragh

12.30 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's response to Storm Darragh.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare): I would like to say how sorry the Government were to hear that two people lost their lives during Storm Darragh. I extend my sympathy to their family and friends.

Late last week, the Met Office issued a red weather warning for wind covering England and Wales, with wider parts of the UK covered by amber and yellow warnings. The Government immediately took action to prepare for the arrival of Storm Darragh. Ahead of the storm, we issued an emergency alert to over 3 million people in affected regions under a red weather warning, urging them to stay indoors. That was the largest use of the early warning system outside of a test scenario. Impacts, although widespread, were managed effectively and local response mechanisms worked to mitigate impacts.

For the households and businesses affected by disruptions, it would have been a very distressing few days. Over 2.3 million customers have had their power restored since the storm made landfall. As of this morning, just under 24,000 customers remain without power. Reconnections are continuing at pace, and operators expect to have all remaining customers reconnected by tomorrow.

I am grateful for the response from colleagues in devolved Administrations and local resilience forums around the country. I praise our emergency responders and utility workers, who have worked, and indeed are continuing to work, so hard in difficult conditions to help the public manage the impacts of the storm.

Ben Lake: Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for her reply and join her in expressing my condolences to the families of those two individuals who have tragically lost their lives. The storm left hundreds of thousands of homes without power and disrupted critical infrastructure. We are all grateful to the engineers who are working tirelessly to restore power under challenging conditions. I pay tribute to the emergency services and local authorities who have also worked hard to clear roads and offer support to households where possible.

However, I am deeply concerned about the thousands of people still without electricity. The storm has brought into sharp relief just how dependent other key utilities are on electricity: from heating to water supply and mobile phone networks. The latter concern is compounded in rural areas by the fact that many have lost their copper landlines in the recent digital switchover and now use a system dependent on mains power. Villages such as Blaenffos, Pont-rhyd-y-groes and Ponterwyd in my constituency, to name just a few, have therefore not only been without power but had periods without water, heat and any means of communicating for help and support.

The increasing frequency of extreme weather events such as Storm Darragh due to climate change underscores the need for robust civil protection measures encompassing both our immediate response and long-term resilience planning. In that regard, our experiences with Storm Darragh highlight a need to review the adequacy of current arrangements. For example, if rural areas such as mine are without mobile signal and no longer have copper landlines, how can they receive important emergency information, let alone call for assistance?

Will the Minister therefore commit to reviewing arrangements in the light of the storm, including whether the priority services register is adequate to address the needs of vulnerable residents during widespread power outages? Will she ensure that key utilities are equipped to mitigate the impacts of future extreme weather events? Finally, will she outline the Government's immediate action to work with the Welsh Government and local authorities in Wales to support communities who are still without power, and their longer-term strategy to strengthen national resilience in the face of extreme weather events?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his efforts over the weekend to provide advice and support to constituents. As he mentioned, many households across north and mid-Wales have been particularly affected by the damage and disruption caused by Storm Darragh. Again, I extend my sympathy to all those who have been affected by power cuts, flooding and other disruptions, which I know will have been distressing. Again, I pay tribute to the emergency services and utility workers in north and mid Wales who are continuing to work hard to support the households affected.

The UK Government have been working closely with our counterparts in the Welsh Government—the hon. Member raised concerns about that. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster spoke to the First Minister on Friday, and we are continuing to work closely together. I hope that reassures the hon. Member on that aspect. In my response I set out how work is under way to resolve the situation of properties without power and affected by flooding, which the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out.

More broadly, we are continuing to work with partners to ensure that the disruption is addressed as soon as possible, and that support is provided to those affected. I hope that the hon. Gentleman feels reassured that we are constantly monitoring the work that we have done to see how to improve for future floods and storms. The Government are taking this seriously, and I hope the whole House supports these efforts.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I echo the sentiments of my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) about the people who lost their lives and all those who have been affected by flooding. Those of us in communities that have been flooded know how desperate the impact is, not just in the immediate aftermath but for months afterwards. Flood victims often say that they have received false warnings on so many occasions that when the warnings come, they often do not have faith in them. What are the Government doing to improve the reliability of those warnings, so that we are better informed? What

are they doing to ensure that the public are better educated about the limitations of the warnings that we get from the Environment Agency?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point and talking about the impact on his constituents and those across the country. The Met Office warnings are based on judgments made by highly trained staff who have carefully collaborated to provide instructive advice to people, businesses, transport operators and emergency responders on a storm's impact on customer disruption. In this particular situation, the emergency alert was sent to approximately 3 million people across Wales and the south-west on Friday 6 December. It reached the people who needed to be reached really effectively.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I applaud the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) for asking this urgent question. He asked some very detailed questions about communication and connectivity that are vital for rural areas. Can the Minister commit to writing to him and to putting that letter in the Library? There is important information that needs to be put on the public record.

Storm Darragh has had and continues to have terrible impacts across the UK. Our thoughts are very much with the loved ones of those who tragically lost their lives in recent days, and with the people whose homes and businesses have been devastated and those who continue to feel the effects of the storm. We must not forget that for at-risk communities, the mental health consequences can remain long after the storms and floods have abated and the blue lights have left. The Opposition pay tribute to the emergency services, the Environment Agency, local authorities and volunteer groups for their efforts to help people in these challenging and dangerous circumstances.

In the coming hours and days, the Government need to focus on quickly reconnecting those without power and giving help to those who have been driven out of their homes, on the repair and reopening of buildings and schools and on the process for insurance claims so that residents can return home as soon as possible. What conversations are being had across Government to ensure that all that happens?

What discussions did the Minister have with ministerial colleagues across Government and with the Environment Agency and the Met Office before the latest storm hit? The Government's flood resilience taskforce was set up to improve flood preparedness. It has met once, and its next meeting is next year. Should it not be stood up more frequently and meet more regularly?

The previous Conservative Government committed a record £5.2 billion from 2019 to 2027 to provide significantly improved flood defences across the country. Will the new Labour Government continue that investment? The farm recovery fund, initiated by the previous Conservative Government to support farmers, is vital. Will this Government provide new money now, after recent storms like Bert and Darragh? Finally, can the Government confirm their ongoing commitment to the communities hit by these increasingly common extreme weather events?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are working closely with devolved Administrations and organisations to address these issues. As I mentioned already, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster spoke to the First Minister on Friday, and we continue to work together. Work is being done to strengthen the resilience review, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and the emergency alerts worked effectively to reach those who have been directly affected. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will respond to the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli on the issues he has raised to ensure that his questions are answered.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the statement, and express my sympathies for those affected and my thanks to emergency and utility workers for all their efforts over the weekend. The storm was of great significance in constituencies such as mine. I appreciate what the Minister has said on the efforts and conversations between the UK Government and the Welsh Government. Can she say any more on that, and assure us that the lessons to be learned from this storm—on resilience and dealing with any future storms—will be shared with all of us in this House, as well as our colleagues in Wales?

Ms Oppong-Asare: Like my hon. Friend, I recognise the impact the storm has had on individuals. We have been working closely with the Welsh Government on the civil contingencies response structures in response to Storm Darragh, and have convened an all-Wales civil contingencies committee. Officials in the UK Government regularly engage with the Welsh Government on this matter, and ensure that local responders are working effectively. We will be looking to see what else we can learn from this situation.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake), who asked an excellent question and raised this important issue today. My thoughts also are with those who tragically lost their lives this weekend and with their families, and with all the communities who have been so terribly affected by the storm. I have immense gratitude, as I am sure we all do, for our emergency services, utility companies staff and local communities, who have responded with such effectiveness and compassion.

We were affected in Westmorland, although not as badly as the constituents of many Welsh Members present. Last week was the ninth anniversary of Storm Desmond, which we remember and still bear the scars from, and we stand in solidarity with all those deeply affected right now.

The storm reminds us of our duty to protect homes, communities, farmland and businesses. In the Budget, the Government agreed to funding for flood defences up to March 2026, with the potential threat of reduced funding thereafter. Will the Minister take this opportunity to guarantee, as a minimum, the current level of funding for flood defences beyond March 2026?

So much farmland has been affected by the storm, yet farms are key to successful flood management, storing water and slowing the flow to protect villages and towns downstream, such as Appleby and Kendal in

[Tim Farron]

my constituency. Will the Minister now agree to increasing the environmental land management scheme budget to help our farmers be our first and best defence against flooding?

Finally, will the Minister confirm that the Government will expand eligibility for the farming recovery fund? Will they publish an up-to-date water management strategy to set out a plan for urgent maintenance and upgrades to flooding defences to protect homes, farmland and businesses at risk?

Ms Oppong-Asare: The Government are working at pace to step up further preparations for winter. We are investing £2.4 billion up to March 2026 to improve flood resilience and better protect communities across the country. We are also looking at lessons from the floods, which are being fed directly in to the floods resilience taskforce that was set up under this new Government. That will look at flood defences and bolstering the nation's resilience to extreme weather. I had the opportunity to attend the floods resilience taskforce with a wide range of stakeholders, and it is a positive way to address future issues. We recognise the significant impact flooding has on farmers and rural communities, which is why we are providing up to £50 million for internal drainage boards and an additional £60 million through the farming recovery fund.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for coming to the House to explain what has been going on in relation to Storm Darragh. Like everyone I thank the emergency services, and I also thank Monmouthshire county council for all the work it did this weekend. Over 2 million households lost power this weekend, including a group of constituents in Llangybi, one of whom was extremely vulnerable. Will the Minister share with us how many households have been reconnected?

Ms Oppong-Asare: As my hon. Friend mentions, up to 2.3 million customers lost power during the storm. As of this morning, as I mentioned, just under 24,000 customers are without power. The Government have been reassured that the operators are due to reconnect them all by tomorrow.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I join the House in paying tribute to the emergency services, including Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service and Dyfed-Powys police, as well as Powys county council in my constituency, which have been working tirelessly to keep people safe over the past few days. Communities across Wales, including in my constituency, have been battered by this storm only a few weeks after already taking significant damage from Storm Bert. Many of my constituents in the Swansea valley were left without power for over 48 hours and some may not have power restored until Thursday. Likewise, many water supplies have been disrupted and towns such as Builth Wells have experienced significant flooding. What support are the UK Government providing to Wales to ensure that power is restored as soon as possible to those households?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I send my sympathy to the hon. Gentleman's constituents who are still directly affected. Our priority is to ensure that everyone without power is reconnected as quickly as possible. Our colleagues in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero have been receiving regular updates from the Energy Networks Association on electricity outages. Work is being done swiftly to ensure that those who are directly affected get their power back as soon as possible.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): I thank my neighbour the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) for asking the urgent question. Let me add my voice to the chorus of voices thanking the emergency services, and also pay tribute to communities and local businesses such as the Hand in Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog, in my constituency. The storm brought out the best in society, which is what the worst weather sometimes does. Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to local businesses and civic society for all their work in helping those most affected by the storm?

Ms Oppong-Asare: Local businesses, local resilience forums and emergency services have played a powerful role, and it has been great to see communities and businesses come together to address these problems, so I echo my hon. Friend's thanks.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): These storms are becoming more frequent, and we in Scotland probably have more experience of them than most, but there is a prevailing sense that we are lurching from one storm to the next. In the case of Storm Bert, for example, it was felt that the Met Office did not issue enough warnings early enough. To what extent is the Minister bringing the four nations together to share what they have learned from the various storms so that we can respond to them better?

Ms Oppong-Asare: The Government have been working closely with devolved Administrations, and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster organised a call on Friday to see what work could be done with them collaboratively. A meeting was held to establish which areas were directly affected and where there were threats to life, and an alert was issued as quickly as possible to those areas in particular. However, we recognise that there was some delay in the conveying of information, so we are working with operators to see how they can get the message out as speedily as possible in the event of another storm of this kind.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Will the Minister please give us an update on the extent of the floods that resulted from the storm? Rural constituencies such as mine experienced a double whammy: we were battered by the storm, and then we were deluged once again by flooding. That double problem is also much more sustained.

Ms Oppong-Asare: A lot of work has been done in this regard, but if my hon. Friend writes to me I shall be able to respond to her directly and adequately.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) for securing the urgent question.

Electricity supplies have yet to be restored to some Gwynedd communities, more than 72 hours after the red weather warning. The switch from copper to digital technology means that all landline telephones will need electricity to work in the future, as do mobile phone masts. These matters are reserved to Westminster—they are not devolved—so will the Minister speak to her colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and commit to a Government assessment of the resilience of mobile and landline communication in Wales and the adequacy of the support given by BT and EE to elderly and vulnerable people during the switchover process?

Ms Oppong-Asare: Engineers have been working tirelessly with National Grid's electricity distributors and with other networks to ensure that steps are taken to reconnect vulnerable customers in particular, but if the right hon. Member writes to me, we can look into this in more detail.

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to our fantastic volunteers who worked around the clock in difficult circumstances, playing a critical role in protecting people and homes? Will she visit my constituency to meet some of those volunteers, including some from Lowdham, Rainworth and Hucknall, who continue to face the threat of flooding?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I too thank the volunteers who have worked so hard to provide support. I always try to visit areas around the country, and if my hon. Friend writes to me, I will see whether if I can visit her constituency with the floods Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), to see the hard work that those volunteers have been doing.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): This morning, 2,500 people in my constituency were still without power. That is down from 8,000 yesterday morning, and I am grateful to all the engineers who have worked so hard to get those people back online. Water booster pumps also lost power on Sunday, so those in a large area of the constituency experienced low water pressure. In the sizeable town of Wem, there were large areas with no water at all, despite there having been only a yellow weather warning. It seems that that the resilience of the utility companies is not where it needs to be to respond to an event of this nature. Can the Minister reassure me about what she is doing with those companies to ensure that we are more resilient in future, given that these events will be increasingly frequent as the impact of climate change worsens?

Ms Oppong-Asare: We and our colleagues in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero are working closely together, and as I said earlier, they are receiving updates from the Energy Networks Association. If any of the hon. Member's constituents are directly affected, I urge them to call the network operator directly by dialling 105, or to visit the Power Cut 105 website. However, she is right that we should be exploring the impact that this could have on us in the future.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): In Ironbridge gorge, a world heritage site in my constituency, the river fills up with water from Wales in the days after these storms. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the Government pay attention to secondary areas such as mine, and will Government Departments ensure that the economic hammer blow that flooding causes in communities such as mine is considered in any future grant applications by the local authority?

Ms Oppong-Asare: We are currently reviewing the flooding funding formula, which will address some of the issues that my hon. Friend has raised.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I am incredibly concerned about the news that funding for organisations that co-ordinate multi-agency responses in the event of emergency, such as the Sussex resilience forum, is set to end in April next year. Will the Minister commit to long-term statutory funding for crucial organisations that plan emergency responses?

Ms Oppong-Asare: There is already a long-standing relationship between central Government and responders, underpinned by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government already works with local resilience forums on preparing for, and acting during, responses to emergencies, and provides a direct line of communication for them to central Government. The Met Office is our statutory responder under the Civil Contingencies Act, which strengthens its role at the heart of UK resilience. I recognise the contribution of resilience forums, and in particular the role that they played during the storm.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Northumberland has been battered by storms in recent years, most dramatically and devastatingly by Storm Arwen. Can the Minister assure me that she and her colleagues are taking proactive steps to protect communities in some of the most isolated places in my constituency from the devastating impact of these storms?

Ms Oppong-Asare: The flood resilience taskforce set up by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is looking into exactly those issues.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Storm Darragh brought 96 mph winds, flooding and power outages, and it came hot on the heels of Storm Bert, which brought severe rainfall and terrible flooding. Given the strong evidence that links increasing frequency and severity of storms with climate change, may I ask for the Minister's response to the comments of Emma Pinchbeck, the new chief executive of the Climate Change Committee, who said at the weekend that the UK was "not ready" for these increasingly severe impacts of climate change? What are the Government doing, and what will they do, to make adaptation an urgent national priority?

Ms Oppong-Asare: As the hon. Member knows, we have only just come into office, but we have already set up a flood resilience taskforce and are carrying out a resilience review, so we do recognise these issues. Just a few months in, we are already looking into them proactively.

Becky Gittins (Clwyd East) (Lab): As the Minister and Members from across the House have done, I commend our local authorities and our emergency services for the hard work that they did to make people safe. The storm caused so much damage; communities in my constituency, such as Northop, were without power for several days. Sadly, many of us had to change our plan to go out on Small Business Saturday and support our local high streets, which are struggling. There is a palpable commitment in this Chamber to preparedness. What conversations were had with the Welsh Government prior to the storm to ensure that we were ready to tackle it?

Ms Oppong-Asare: The Government regularly meet officials to look at how we can work with the devolved Administrations. On preparedness, as I mentioned, we are doing work on the resilience review. I have had a huge amount of engagement with various stakeholders and the devolved Administrations, so that no one is left behind when it comes to making sure that we are prepared.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Let me thank the emergency services, Carmarthenshire county council, which is the local authority, and National Grid engineers for working tirelessly to help residents who were without power in Caerfyrddin. I also want to give a shout out to the farmers who helped clear the roads with their chainsaws.

Given that many areas are on their fourth day without electricity—most have not been promised a connection until Thursday, and some do not have water or connectivity either—it is clear that we need additional help. The 105 line is not working. It is not its fault; it is just overwhelmed by the number of calls. What advice does the Minister have for people living in rural communities such as Trelech, Brechfa, Blaenwaun and Llanarthne, who are in desperate need of generators for their village halls and community centres, so that they can provide hot water, hot meals and a place to charge a mobile phone? Can we do something about that?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I thank the hon. Member for her question, and express sympathy with what her constituents are going through. I am disappointed to hear that constituents face difficulty in connecting to networks. We are trying our best to work with networks on the wider lessons for the future. If she writes to me directly about these matters, we can certainly explore the issue further.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): In Harpenden and Berkhamsted, much of the impact of Storm Darragh was wholly preventable, such as Flamstead village being cut off because Trowley Bottom and Chequer Lane were flooded, as well as the flooding on Station Road in Harpenden, and in Puttenham. Next to the Hospice of St Francis is Shootersway, which has repeatedly flooded, and there are worries about ambulance access. What are the Government doing to work with local authorities, and what is the long-term strategy to prevent repeated damage from storms such as Darragh?

Ms Oppong-Asare: We are working with local resilience forums, and we are also carrying out a flood review. As I mentioned, a flood taskforce has been set up and is exploring the issues raised by the hon. Lady.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): While the damage from Storm Darragh was thankfully limited in North Norfolk, a number of properties in my constituency suffered power cuts, which lasted well into Monday. That has once again highlighted the problem caused by poor mobile phone signal in rural parts of North Norfolk. As hon. Members have mentioned, many people did not receive updates and cannot access real-time SMS information. What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology about ensuring that we fix the notspots and keep my constituents safe and connected when the next big storm hits?

Ms Oppong-Asare: DSIT is looking into this matter to see how the issues that the hon. Member raises can be addressed. I recognise that there were issues, especially with access to mobile networks, which made it a real challenge to reach people, particularly vulnerable individuals. The situation is being reviewed by my colleagues in DSIT.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Storm damage in Holyhead has led to severe disruption to the second busiest roll-on, roll-off port in the UK, with ferries to Ireland being cancelled. This weekend also saw the closure of the Britannia bridge to all vehicles. The vulnerability of Ynys Môn's connection to the mainland has been of concern for several years, with access to our main hospital at risk. What assurance can the Minister give me that island communities, such as my constituency of Ynys Môn, will be safeguarded from extreme weather in the future?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I have been very concerned about this issue, particularly as part of our work on resilience looking at who may be affected, including vulnerable people and those who may become vulnerable as a result of extreme weather. Local resilience forums have also been looking into this issue. We are working closely with Welsh local authorities and the Welsh Government on how these issues can be addressed.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Storm Darragh is the second serious storm to hit my Thornbury and Yate constituency in recent weeks; it came soon after Storm Bert, which caused serious flooding disruption. I thank everyone involved in the response. These storms are not going away; owing to the impacts of climate change, they are likely to get worse. We need a clear framework for local authorities, so that they know when they will get support and what that support will be. Can the Minister please provide some clarity on that?

Ms Oppong-Asare: We work very closely with the devolved Administrations, local authorities and emergency responders regularly on how we can address this issue. The UK Resilience Academy will be launched in April next year, and it will be a great way for us to look at the lessons learned and at how we can strengthen our responses to such issues.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): My residents in Bersted, in Pagham and across my constituency of Chichester live in constant fear of storms such as Darragh. They cause severe localised flooding, which often isolates communities and closes businesses, often for months on end. Funding is available for local communities to improve

their flood resilience, but West Sussex county council cut that funding by a third this year, even though the problem in my patch is only getting worse. How does the Minister expect communities to be resilient to flooding if local councils are eroding the funding?

Ms Oppong-Asare: We do not have authority over what West Sussex county council does, but we have been advising councils, which are under a lot of pressure, on how they could look at their flood resilience. This issue is really important, but it has not always been championed. Hopefully, we can have that conversation and encourage people to play a role.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Hurley and Cookham in my constituency have been hit time and again by storms. What work are the Government doing to protect villages along the Thames, which often get flooded several days after a storm has passed?

Ms Oppong-Asare: As I mentioned, we have set up a flood resilience taskforce, which looks at constituencies such as the hon. Member's to make sure that they are not affected. The Government will invest £2.4 billion until March 2026 in improving flood resilience and better protecting communities across the country. DSIT is also looking at UK power networks to see what role they could play. On the emergency alerts that were issued on Friday, we are looking at the lessons learned to see how they could be used effectively if we roll them out in the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her positivity, and for her helpful answers; it is very clear that she is doing her best to make things better. I put on the record my thanks to all emergency service workers across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for their sterling efforts.

Storm Darragh saw the cancellation and delay of numerous trains and flights across Northern Ireland and, further afield, across the United Kingdom. Although that cannot be helped, thousands of people were at a financial loss due to the cancellations and delays. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that airlines and rail companies across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland do their bit to ensure that due compensation is paid to constituents, and that they do not lose out due to the weather conditions?

Ms Oppong-Asare: That is an issue on which we need to work collaboratively, particularly when it comes to the impact on the hon. Gentleman's constituency. We need to see what the challenges are, and why these matters are not being addressed, particularly at local level.

Point of Order

1.10 pm

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 1 August, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about the closure of Yeovil district hospital's hyper-acute stroke unit. Despite following up several times, including with his senior staff, I have not received a response. On 2 December, I submitted a named-day parliamentary question for response on 6 December, but I have received only a holding answer. My understanding is that while Members can occasionally expect to receive a holding answer, we should usually receive a proper answer by the due date, or at least in a timely manner. From a previous parliamentary exchange, I understand that the decision to give a holding answer is determined by the terms of the question, how much information is sought and how difficult it is to obtain, but I do not believe that I am asking a question of great difficulty. What more can I do to ensure a response from the Department for my constituency of Yeovil?

Mr Speaker: The Chair is not responsible for the quality or timeliness of Ministers' answers to correspondence or to questions, but it seems to me that the hon. Gentleman has waited an awfully long time, both for a reply to his letter and for a substantive answer to his written question. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have noted his remarks, and I hope that somebody from the Department of Health and Social Care is already drafting a response. I am sure that they will be in touch with him very soon to explain what is going on. I do not want to have to keep repeating this, but Members have a right to expect timely answers to correspondence, and to expect that when a holding answer is issued, a substantive reply will be along very soon thereafter. This seems to be a trend; it is becoming more and more apparent that Ministers are not responding. I am still waiting for a Minister in the Lords to respond to me, so I know the frustration well.

BILLS PRESENTED

BREAST CANCER SCREENING (REVIEW) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wera Hobhouse, supported by Clive Jones, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to review the current arrangements for breast cancer screening, including the potential merits of reducing the minimum age at which women are invited for regular breast cancer screening and of increasing the use of automated breast ultrasound; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 7 March 2025, and to be printed (Bill 144).

CARBON EMISSIONS FROM BUILDINGS (NET ZERO) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Ellie Chowns presented a Bill to require new buildings to meet net zero standards for embodied and operational carbon emissions; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 11 July 2025, and to be printed (Bill 148).

BUILDING REGULATIONS (SWIFT BRICKS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Ellie Chowns presented a Bill to require the installation of swift bricks on new buildings; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 11 July 2025, and to be printed (Bill 149).

RIVERS, STREAMS AND LAKES (PROTECTED STATUS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Victoria Collins, supported by Jess Brown-Fuller, Dr Danny Chambers, Edward Morello, Tom Gordon, Alex Brewer, Calum Miller, Tessa Munt and Manuela Perteghella

presented a Bill to make provision for the designation of rivers, streams and lakes as having protected status; to specify criteria for minimum standards that a site must meet where it has been designated as a river, stream or lake with protected status; to set minimum standards of water quality, safety, environmental management and provision of information in relation to such sites; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 17 January 2025, and to be printed (Bill 150).

Marriage (Prohibited Degrees of Relationship) Bill*Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)*

1.13 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the marriage of first cousins; and for connected purposes.

Members across the House may wonder why first-cousin marriage is not already illegal. In fact, many in this House and in the country may already believe that it is. That is understandable, because as early as the middle of the fifth century in England, the Church practised the Roman doctrine on first-cousin marriage, which was clarified by the first Archbishop of Canterbury in the early eighth century, after he received a letter from Pope Gregory I. The letter cited Leviticus 18:6, which states that sacred law forbids a man to uncover the nakedness of his near kin. Throughout the centuries that followed, this canon law forbidding first-cousin marriage remained the norm, and by the 11th century it extended to sixth cousins.

This 1,000-year tradition of first-cousin marriage being illegal was continued until 1540, when King Henry VIII broke with Rome and legalised marriage between first cousins so that he could marry Catherine Howard, his fifth wife and a cousin of his second wife, Anne Boleyn. Sadly, both Catherine and Anne ended up facing a swift end at the block. However, the law pertaining to first-cousin marriage has been more enduring, remaining unchanged ever since.

Today, according to the *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, cousin marriage is practised by about 10% of the world and is most prevalent in the middle east, west Asia and north Africa. However, the practice varies enormously within countries and by regional culture, reaching at its highest over 80% in parts of rural Pakistan. By contrast, in China and western countries it is less than 1%.

Patrick Nash, a visiting fellow at Oxford University's faculty of theology and religion, describes how a region's history of harsh conditions, such as resource-scarce rurality, proximity to conflict zones and industrial poverty, plays a major role in developing the cultures that practise first-cousin marriage. He argues that cousin marriage was at one time biologically beneficial for the survival of mankind, when times were especially hard and inhospitable. However, this does not carry forward into modern living conditions in our post-industrial age, where genetic and degenerative diseases are among the most severe threats to public health.

That brings us to the issue today. Certain diaspora communities have extremely high rates of first-cousin marriage, with a rate of 20% to 40% among Irish Travellers and higher rates still among the British Pakistani community. There is a worrying trend, as this rate has increased significantly from that of their grandparents' age group. Although there have been some reports of the rate falling within the last decade as young people push back against the system, there remains an extraordinarily strong link.

I have already touched on why first-cousin marriage is problematic, but I will expand further, as there are three real issues at stake: health, freedom and our national values. The dangers of consanguineous relations have been appreciated throughout history. The consequences of extreme intergenerational cousin marriage within the Habsburg monarchy of Spain eventually led to the demise of the house itself and the war of the Spanish succession. That is very well documented. By the 19th century, the *British Medical Journal* had published many papers on ill health transmitted to children through first-cousin marriage. Indeed, Charles Darwin himself publicly expressed concerns based on his own experience of marrying his first cousin, with three of their 10 children sadly dying in childhood.

Today, the health risks are explicable in granular scientific detail. According to Alison Shaw, professor of social anthropology at Oxford University, the child of first cousins carries approximately double the risk of inheriting a serious disorder than the child of unrelated people. Health consequences can include: recessive disorders such as Tay-Sachs, cerebral palsy and cystic fibrosis, which require lifelong treatment and can lead to premature death; an increased susceptibility to cancer and infectious pathogens such as hepatitis; birth defects including facial clefts and cardiovascular conditions; an increased risk of many illnesses, including schizophrenia and Alzheimer's; and higher infant mortality. Moreover, where the parents come from multigenerational cousin parents of their own, this risk is compounded and intensified with every subsequent generation. The science is clear. First-cousin marriages should be banned on the basis of health risk alone.

The second issue at stake relates to freedom, and particularly the freedom of women. In my work in the last Parliament to ban so-called virginity testing and hymenoplasty, I saw at first hand through speaking to people how reproductive mechanisms are used to coerce and control women and girls where actions and freedoms are heavily controlled. Women and girls living under a clan mentality often know the scientific risks of first-cousin marriage but make considered social and cultural calculations. Strict honour codes—where expressions of individuality can be subject to social isolation, violence and even death—dominate thinking. Notions of dishonour can also significantly hinder a family's standing among clan institutions, risking the family's standing in the social hierarchy and materially affecting issues such as shared access to clan wealth. It is vital that we ensure that freedoms that have been hard fought for by women over centuries are protected.

Finally, alongside the impact on women's rights, cousin marriage has a broader societal impact. Joseph Henrich, professor of human evolutionary biology at Harvard University, has found that cousin marriage does not just affect individual rights, but reshapes society. His research shows that cousin marriage declined in medieval Europe as individualism grew. The weakening of blind family ties led to the growth of individualism, natured trust of outsiders and, in turn, helped to develop a deeper civic responsibility beyond clan to country, allowing people to break free from the chains of clan, class and caste in their society.

Anthropologist Sir Jack Goody attributes the Church's ban on cousin marriage as the driving force behind the breakdown of barriers between Angles, Saxons, Jutes

and Vikings in early English society. As people were enabled to marry outside their clan, sectarian affiliations were gradually dissolved, which paved the way for the modern nation state.

Britain is not unique in having had immigration in recent decades from some regions where first-cousin marriage is prevalent, and therefore there has been a revival in the practice that we moved away from centuries ago. Norway has already banned the practice, and Sweden and Denmark are looking to do the same. Much like so-called virginity testing and hymenoplasty, it is clear that the practice is not really conducive to modern British society.

As MPs, we are more than mere delegates but rather legislators for the mother of all Parliaments—our country. As MPs, we should be more than glorified social workers seeking to help constituents through the bureaucracy and the system. We have a role in changing things for the better too. Henry VIII changed the law on cousin marriage to suit his own personal interests and pursuits, but we should act in the national interest.

Of course, we should find a balance. I have outlined the risks to health, freedom—especially for women—and the cohesion of our society. For me, those risks tip the balance against personal freedoms. While there will be details to work through, I hope right hon. and hon. Members give me the chance to take the Bill forward to Second Reading, and that Government Front Benchers will look at the measures as a vehicle for positive change in our country. In the end, the legislation is about more than individual marriages; it is about the values and foundations of our society and our democracy.

1.21 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): As the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden) states, there are documented health risks with first-cousin marriage, and I agree that there is a need for greater awareness about that issue. Virginity testing and forced marriages must be prevented, and the freedom of women must be protected at all times.

However, the way to redress the issue is not to empower the state to ban adults from marrying each other, not least because I do not think such measures would be effective or enforceable. Instead, the matter needs to be approached as a health awareness issue and, where women are being forced against their will to undergo marriage, as a cultural awareness issue. In doing so, it is important to recognise that this is a highly sensitive issue for many people. In discussing it, we should try to step into the shoes of those who perhaps are not from the same culture as ours, to better understand why the practice continues to be so widespread.

An estimated 35% to 50% of all sub-Saharan African populations either prefer or accept cousin marriage, and it is extremely common in the middle east and south Asia. The reason the practice is so common is that ordinary people see family intermarriage as something that is very positive overall; as something that helps to build family bonds and puts families on a more secure financial foothold.

However, as is well documented, it is not without health risks for the children of those relationships, some of whom will be born out of wedlock. Instead of stigmatising those who are in cousin marriages, or those

[*Iqbal Mohamed*]

who are inclined to be, a much more positive approach would be to facilitate advanced genetic test screening for prospective married couples, as is the case in all Arab countries in the Persian gulf, and to run health education programmes targeting those communities where the practice is most common.

I therefore urge the House to vote against the motion and to find a more positive approach to addressing the issues that are caused by first-cousin marriage, including the health risks, and the consequences of modern conflicts and displacement of populations around the world.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23) and agreed to. Ordered,

That Mr Richard Holden, Robert Jenrick, Dan Carden, Claire Coutinho, David Smith, Neil O'Brien, Lee Anderson, Mr Andrew Snowden, John Lamont, Nick Timothy, Katie Lam and Laura Trott present the Bill.

Mr Richard Holden accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time on Friday 17 January 2025, and to be printed (Bill 146).

Finance Bill

[1ST ALLOCATED DAY]

(Clauses 7 to 12 and 15 to 18, Schedules 1 to 3 and related New Clauses)

Considered in Committee

[*Ms NUSRAT GHANI in the Chair*]

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I remind Members that, in Committee, Members should not address the Chair as “Deputy Speaker.” When addressing the Chair, please use our name. “Madam Chair” or “Chair” will also suffice.

Clause 7

MAIN RATES OF CGT FOR GAINS OTHER THAN
CARRIED INTEREST GAINS

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Schedule 1.

Clauses 8 to 11 stand part.

Schedule 2.

Clauses 12 stand part.

New clause 1—*Impact assessment: capital gains tax*—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of the passing of this Act, lay before Parliament a review of the impact of the measures contained in clauses 7 to 12 and schedules 1 and 2 of this Act, on—

- (a) long-term investment;
- (b) disposable income across different income deciles, and
- (c) tax revenue.”

This new clause would require the Government to produce a report setting out the impact of changes to Capital Gains Tax made in this Act on investment and the disposable income of taxpayers across different income deciles.

New clause 4—*Section 12: review*—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act coming into force, publish a review of the expected impact of the measures in section 12 of this Act on—

- (a) the timing of asset disposals or transactions;
- (b) shifting between different assets;
- (c) shifting between gains and income;
- (d) tax planning;
- (e) migration; and
- (f) non-compliance by non-payment, misreporting or underreporting of chargeable assets, gains or income.”

New clause 5—*Business asset disposal relief: review of increase in rate*—

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must commission and publish an assessment of the expected impact of the provisions of section 8 on the number of Business Asset Disposal Relief claims involving the sale of a business.

(2) The assessment must compare estimates for the number of claims involving the sale of a business in the tax year 2024-25 with the number of such claims in the tax year 2025-26.

(3) The assessment must compare the impact under the provisions of section 8 with what impact could have been expected had the rate remained unchanged”.

1.27 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Tulip Siddiq):

Since 2010, the UK has experienced low productivity, rising debt levels and declining public services. Public sector net debt is at its highest since the early 1960s, at 98.5% of GDP. Per capita, GDP remains lower than before the covid-19 pandemic.

In July this year, the Government uncovered a challenging fiscal and spending inheritance, with a £22 billion in-year pressure in the public finances. The Office for Budget Responsibility's review into March's spending forecasts concluded that had the information that has since been shared by the Treasury been made available to it at the time of the March Budget, there would have been a materially higher departmental expenditure limits forecast for 2024 to 2025. This was the result of the previous Government not factoring in the impact of a series of new, challenging pressures on the public finances, not taking the difficult decisions needed to address these pressures, and instead making a series of commitments that they could not fund.

This Government are committed to fixing the foundations and delivering a decade of national renewal. To do so, we must turn the page and take a different approach. In the autumn Budget, the House will have heard the Chancellor set out the Government's first steps to repair the public finances, by taking the tough decisions needed to address the £22 billion in-year pressures to avoid further damage to our public services, including securing £5.5 billion of savings.

We are also putting in place significant reforms to strengthen our fiscal and spending framework that will improve certainty, transparency and accountability, and ensure that the situation can never happen again. This Government are taking the tough decisions on tax, spending and welfare that are necessary to repair the public finances and restore economic and fiscal stability. Those choices are not easy, but they are transparent, they are responsible and, with such a difficult position, they will ensure that the Government can deliver on our commitments not to increase taxes on working people.

The changes to the main rates of capital gains tax in clauses 7 to 11 will help to address the gap in public finances while retaining the UK's internationally competitive investment climate. The new rates are revenue-maximising in the current design of the tax system, generating an additional £8.9 billion over the forecast period. The UK's headline CGT rates will remain lower than those of France, Germany and Italy, and the highest rate is still lower than it was between 2010 and 2016. The new rates will mostly affect people who earn income from selling financial assets. The Government are taking the difficult but responsible decision to ask that group to pay a little bit more tax in order to restore economic stability.

Clause 12 represents the first step in a package of reforms to the taxation of carried interest by increasing the applicable rates of capital gains tax to 32% for carried interest arising on or after 6 April 2025. The reforms will put the tax treatment of carried interest on a fairer and more stable footing for the long term, while preserving the UK's competitive position as a global asset management hub.

I will begin with clauses 7 to 9, concerning the capital gains tax package. CGT is charged on individuals' annual capital gains, net of losses and allowable costs.

Less than 1% of adults pay CGT per year. There are lower rates available for reliefs, including business asset disposal relief and investors' relief. CGT has an annual exempt amount of £3,000 for individuals, which keeps people with lower levels of capital gains out of the system.

To repair the public finances and help raise the revenue required to increase funding for public services, the Government are increasing the main rates of CGT. The clauses will increase the lower main rate of CGT from 10% to 18% and increase the higher rate from 20% to 24%. Those changes affect disposables made on or after 30 October 2024. The clauses also increase the CGT rate at which business asset disposal relief and investors' relief are charged in a phased way from 10% to 14%, effective from 6 April 2025, and from 14% to 18%, effective from 6 April 2026. Phasing in the rate increases for those CGT reliefs demonstrates the Government's commitment to a predictable tax system.

The Government accept that for some entrepreneurs, a lower CGT rate will be factored into their plans for exiting the business, which can be a once-in-a-lifetime event. Although it is right to increase CGT rates to raise revenue, it is also fair to give business owners some time to adjust. The changes will raise £2.5 billion per year by the end of the forecast period, while ensuring the UK's headline CGT rates remain below those of France, Germany and Italy.

Turning to clause 10, investors' relief offers access to the lower rates of CGT on the disposal of qualifying unlisted shares. Its objective is to provide the financial incentive for individuals to invest in unlisted trading companies over the long term and help companies in accessing other forms of investment. The lifetime limit for investors' relief was previously £10 million, compared with business asset disposals relief's lifetime limit of £1 million. We feel that that disparity in lifetime limits is unfair towards entrepreneurs and could encourage harmful tax planning strategies. The changes made by clause 10 will reduce the lifetime limit for investors' relief to match that of business asset disposals relief at £1 million of qualifying gains per person. Investors' relief has received little take-up since its introduction in 2016, and so the Government expect that the measure will affect a very small number of individuals.

Turning to clause 11 and schedule 2, which introduce transitional arrangements and anti-forestalling rules, the transitional arrangements are consistent with similar rules put in place when CGT rates were charged in-year in 2010. The anti-forestalling rules draw on the approach taken when changes were made to business asset disposals relief in 2020. Transitional arrangements are needed for a small group of taxpayers in some specific circumstances. Those taxpayers will have capital gains that are ascribed to the 2024-25 tax year in general and not to any particular point in the year, and because clause 7 makes in-year changes, the Government have a legal responsibility to clarify the capital gains tax liabilities of those taxpayers. To avoid taxing those individuals retrospectively, the legislation puts in place transitional arrangements. The relevant capital gains are treated as arising in the earlier part of the year and are therefore subject to the previous rate schedule. From April 2025, there will be no need for those arrangements to remain.

I now turn to anti-forestalling rules. Some taxpayers will have tried to lock in the old rate by entering into various artificial arrangements and specific anti-forestalling

[Tulip Siddiq]

rules are needed to prevent abuse. The anti-forestalling rules target disposals entered into before 30 October 2024 but completed after that date for the main rate change and the investors' relief lifetime limit reduction. They also target disposals entered into on or after 30 October 2024 for the phased rate changes applying to business asset disposal relief and investors' relief. The provisions ensure that such people can still access the previous rates and the previous investors' relief lifetime limit, but only where the disposal has not been artificially structured for the purpose of securing a tax advantage.

I now turn to clause 12, which concerns CGT on carried interest gains. Carried interest is a form of performance-related reward that is received by a small number of individuals who work as fund managers and, unlike other such rewards, carried interest can, where certain conditions are met, be subject to capital gains tax. Hon. Members will have heard the Chancellor announce at the Budget that the Government will reform the way carried interest is taxed, ensuring that that is fairer and in line with the economic characteristics of the reward. From 6 April 2026, a revised regime will tax all carried interest within the income tax framework with a 72.5% multiplier applied to the amount of qualifying carried interest that is brought into charge. The Government are also consulting on potential new conditions of access to the regime. Legislation to implement that revised regime will be included in a future finance Bill.

In advance of the implementation of the revised regime, the Government are acting now to increase the rates of capital gains tax that apply to carried interest. Clause 12 therefore increases the rates of capital gains tax for carried interest arising on or after 6 April 2025 from 18% and 28% to 32%, and from that date, the single CGT rate will apply to all relevant carried interest, subject to the same conditions as currently.

To conclude, the increases to the main rates of CGT to 18% and 24% represent a balanced and responsible approach to revenue raising, which will help the Government to improve the UK's public finances and services while remaining competitive for investment. The clauses phase in the rate increase for business asset disposal relief over 18 months to mitigate impacts where the previous level of relief was factored into anyone's plans to exit their business in the short term. That underlines the Government's commitment to supporting entrepreneurs and recognising the vital role that small businesses play in our economy. In addition, the move to a single higher rate of CGT on carried interest at 32% demonstrates the Government's commitment to decisive action now, while we rightly take the time to undertake technical consultation on the revised regime.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Just before I call the shadow Minister, I remind Members that, in Committee, I am Madam Chair or Madam Chairman.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Chair. It is always a pleasure to see you in Committee and to serve under your chairmanship.

On behalf of the Opposition, I rise to speak to new clauses 4 and 5, which stand in the name of my right hon. Friend, the shadow Chancellor. Before I do so, let me set the scene for clauses 7 to 12.

When announcing these changes in her Budget, the Chancellor said:

"We need to drive growth, promote entrepreneurship and support wealth creation".—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 818.]

She said something similar to the BBC in 2023:

"We want Britain to be the best place to start and grow a business"

and that was why, she said

"I don't have any plans to increase capital gains tax."

This Bill corrects the record. Labour wants to increase capital gains tax, so clearly it does not have any plans for Britain to be the best place in which to start and grow a business. Is it any wonder that business confidence is now at the lowest level we have seen since the pandemic?

Clause 7 increases the main rates of capital gains tax from 10% and 20% to 18% and 24% respectively, with schedule 1 making consequential changes to reflect that these rates are now equal to those on residential property. The Office for Budget Responsibility rates the costings on this policy as "highly uncertain". It says that

"these costings are among the most uncertain in the policy package, reflecting the range of potential behavioural responses."

This Government are far too quick to ask others to explain how they would pay for Labour's policies, when they are clearly failing to explain convincingly how their own policies would pay for themselves.

I wish to take this opportunity to highlight an issue raised with me by the Chartered Institute of Taxation. First, let me place on record my thanks to the organisation for its invaluable support. It has been informed by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs that it is too late to change the format of the relevant 2024-25 tax return pages to accommodate this in-year change. I would therefore be very grateful if the Minister could provide the following assurances to HMRC: first, that it will be properly equipped to implement this measure; secondly, that the changes will be published as widely as possible; and, thirdly, that an appropriate level of understanding will be shown to taxpayers contending with these complications.

Clauses 8 and 9 increase the rates for gains that qualify for business asset disposal relief and investors' relief. From 6 April 2025, the 10% rate will increase to 14%. From 6 April 2026, it will rise again to 18%. As the Chartered Institute of Taxation has highlighted, because the increase to the main rates of capital gains tax is effective immediately, this leaves a window where people selling their business can save up to 14% in capital gains tax until April 2025. In other words, the tax changes in this Bill do not cultivate a start-up Britain; they incentivise British business owners to sell up and sell up soon. This could have been avoided—along with the administrative complications that I have already outlined—had measures in clause 7 been implemented from the start of the new financial year.

Will the Minister explain why the timings of these provisions appear to be so untidy, and, for that matter, how exactly they drive growth, promote entrepreneurship and support wealth creation? I simply say that if hon. Members are not satisfied with the Minister's explanation, I encourage them to vote for new clause 5, which would require a proper assessment of the impact of this perverse incentive.

Clause 10 reduces the lifetime limit for investors' relief from £10 million to £1 million, while clause 11 and schedule 2 bring in transitional rules and anti-forestalling provisions. On those anti-forestalling provisions, the Chartered Institute of Taxation notes that the anti-avoidance measures risk being "unfairly retrospective", capturing those who entered into commercial contracts in good faith before the Budget, on the grounds that they do not satisfy the stringent requirement put down by the Treasury to be "wholly commercial". Will the Minister tell the House why the wording is so tight? Widespread concern over being hit with "unfairly retrospective" taxation would have a chilling effect on parts of the economy. It would exacerbate uncertainty among those who already feel that they have been blindsided by this Government.

1.45 pm

With permission, Madam Chair, I shall dwell in a bit more detail on clause 12, which, for me, sums up the Labour Budget. Only Labour could increase spending by £70 billion a year over the next five years—the equivalent of a furlough scheme every year—and still have growth downgraded as a result. Only Labour could come up with a tax rise that loses money for the Exchequer. It is so bizarre that it is worth repeating. Clause 12 is a tax rise that loses money. Clause 12 increases the rate of capital gains tax applying to carried interest gains by as much as 14%, by applying a single rate of 32% in the 2025-26 financial year, after which Labour proposes to take carried interest out of the capital gains tax regime altogether. The Treasury's own Red Book says that the measure will not raise a single penny in revenue. At the same time, HMRC has disclosed that the implementation of the measure, which impacts on only 3,100 individuals, will cost £4.5 million. To put it another way, the Government could have given every affected individual a tax cut worth £1,500 and the cost to the Exchequer would have been no different. That is total madness, and it is about the only measure in the manifesto that Labour has kept.

The OBR has said that the measure ranks among "the most uncertain" in the entire Budget. It is why new clause 4 would require the Chancellor to review the expected impact of the policy on key behaviours highlighted by the OBR. Will the Minister explain why this one measure, which impacts so few people, costs so much—£4.5 million—when the cost to HMRC of implementing other changes to capital gains tax in the Budget is £600,000.

By the Chancellor's own admission, these measures make Britain a worse place in which to start and grow a business. In fact, the measures tell entrepreneurs, "Don't start up, sell up". They introduce a tax rise, which, unbelievably, loses money. I hope hon. Members will agree that we need to shed more light on the true impact of the Budget.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Madam Chair. I will talk mostly about new clause 5 on capital gains tax, but, given the remarks by the shadow Minister, I will make a few points on the broader matter and on incentives to start a new business.

My constituency of Earley and Woodley in the Thames Valley is one of the hottest destinations for business investment and for new start-ups in the tech and

pharmaceutical sectors. I have met a number of those inspiring entrepreneurs to talk about their start of the business journey. As is widely known, when entrepreneurs start passionately with a project, they are thinking not about the disposal and taxation regime at the end of their journey, but about the infrastructure and the support that they will have around them that brings their idea to fruition. For the tech and pharmaceutical entrepreneurs in Earley and Woodley, that is about a transport infrastructure, a skills base, and schools, colleges and universities in the area that can produce the kinds of graduates who will then staff their company. It is about a regime that is welcoming to entrepreneurship and is welcoming for people to live in and to prosper in. For all those reasons, I very much support our Budget and the Budget that brings more investment to infrastructure across the UK.

First, I welcome the measures on capital gains tax introduced in new clause 5. Let me remind Conservative Members that it was Chancellor Nigel Lawson who, in a much more dramatic measure than that proposed today, equalised the rate of capital gains tax with income tax in 1988. That equalisation was proposed because of tax avoidance. To many people listening to the debate, capital gains tax will not be familiar because, like me, their main means of taxation will be income tax and they will not have come into contact with CGT.

For the purposes of understanding, let me illustrate what I mean by "tax avoidance". The issue was raised with me by a retired consultant when I was canvassing in the summer in the north of my constituency. When I knocked on his door, he said, "What are you going to do about capital gains tax? I want you to ensure that this doesn't happen any more." He then proceeded to illustrate the means by which he had paid less income tax than he otherwise would have done through the capital gains tax system. It was a principled and honourable admission for him to make to his then parliamentary candidate on the doorstep.

Many of us pay income tax, and we are all familiar with the way that it is structured. Among those of us who do not receive income from payroll—that is, who do not work for a company—but have the ability to structure it as self-employed or consultancy income and funnel it into a business of our own creation, that is a channel by which many people avoid paying income tax on activities that are arguably income-like. That happens, as I said, for a minority of people in the UK. The vast majority do not have access to that route because they earn through working for other people through companies, and they are on the payroll and not able to structure their own companies. When those companies holding the—arguably—income revenues are disposed of, that is when capital gains tax comes into the picture. Of course, the rate of capital gains tax is much lower than the rate of income tax, and that is where the gap comes from that was illustrated by my retired constituent.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it is important that the tax system is efficient in raising revenues, which is what our Budget sets out. The tax system must also be principled in ensuring that the tax purposes to which we have allocated certain measures raise the right taxes and are targeted towards the kinds of activities that are meant to be taxed. All of us in the Committee would probably agree that we should pay tax through a progressive system that distinguishes between different

[Yuan Yang]

forms of revenue-raising activities, but that allocates people fairly and proportionately to those right and relevant activities.

I am reminded of the announcements that came out during the last Government regarding the tax affairs of the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), who paid 23% in average tax on his £2.2 million in earnings. That was of course possible because of the relatively low rate of capital gains tax that he was paying on the vast majority of his earnings, which came through capital and not through earned income.

Again, to the vast majority of people listening to the debate, I am sure that that is a reality far outside their understanding. The vast majority of people in the UK earn income through going out to work and working hard every day. It is for those people—the working people of this country—that this Budget has been made, so that we can lift livelihoods across the country by properly funding our public services and by closing the significant in-year overspend that the previous Government made of £22 billion. Through those measures, and by ensuring the financial stability of our tax system and the economic stability of our country, we will start to raise living standards across the UK. For those reasons, I very much support the measures.

The Chairman of Ways and Means: As colleagues will notice, the Speaker's Chair is vacant, so I remind Members that the Chair should be addressed as Madam Chair or Madam Chairman. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I commend the Government for looking at capital gains tax as a potential source of revenue to get public services back on their feet, but we Liberal Democrats believe there was a better way of doing it. Right now, capital gains tax is unfair for everyone. Most people already pay too much capital gains tax when they sell a property or a few shares because the system does not account for inflation over the time they have owned them. At the same time, a tiny number of super-wealthy individuals—the top 0.1%—are able to exploit the capital gains system as effectively one giant loophole to avoid paying income tax like everyone else.

According to the latest HMRC statistics, 12,000 multimillionaires used the loophole to pay less than half the top rate of income tax on their combined £50 billion of income. Instead of raising capital gains tax across the board, we Liberal Democrats would have liked to see the Government properly reform CGT to make it much fairer. To provide a comparison, under the Labour Government's proposals, the main rate of capital gains tax for basic rate taxpayers is being increased from 10% to 18% and, for higher and additional rate taxpayers, from 20% to 24%. According to the Government's own statistics, the change will raise about £2.5 billion per year by 2029 to 2030. Under the Liberal Democrat proposal, we would have separated out capital gains tax from income, raised the tax-free allowance, provided a new allowance for inflation and had three different rates of capital gains tax. That would have raised £5.2 billion, more than twice the Government's proposals.

As colleagues will hear, key to our proposal is the reintroduction of indexation—effectively, an allowance keeping people from paying tax on gains that are purely the result of inflation. That would be fair for ordinary people selling a family home or a few shares, but it would also incentivise long-term investment by ensuring that taxpayers are not penalised due to inflation if they hold their assets for a long period of time.

To summarise, the Liberal Democrat proposals for reforming capital gains tax would be fairer and would raise twice as much. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said our proposals would move CGT in a “sensible direction”. Our new clause 1 is incredibly simple. It would require the Government to produce a report setting out the impact of the changes to capital gains tax under the Bill on investment and on the disposable income of people in different income brackets. The objective behind the new clause is to illustrate to the Government that there is a fairer way to reform capital gains tax and to encourage the Government, in the spirit of constructive opposition, to look at our proposals in future years.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Madam Chair. I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in Committee of the whole House on a crucial Bill that underpins the new Government's aim of fixing a tax system that has become less fair and less sustainable over 14 years of Conservative government. We will ensure that the wealthiest pay their fair share, and we will increase funding for public services. I will not detain hon. Members long as we have debated the measures at length already, but I want to make a few brief comments on the portions of the Bill that relate to capital gains tax.

As other Members have pointed out, we need to remind ourselves of our starting point. As the director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, Paul Johnson, said in his response to the Budget:

“It does bear repeating that the fiscal inheritance”—that this Government face—
“is truly dire.”

It is in that context that the Bill and the wider measures announced at the Budget should be seen. As the IFS has set out, and Members have mentioned, capital gains tax is paid by less than 1% of the adult population—about 350,000 people. If we break that down further, around 12,000 people—0.2% of the adult population—realise gains of more than £1 million, which account for two thirds of capital gains tax. That is 12,000 people—the main contributors to capital gains tax—paying a little bit more.

Clause 7 raises the headline rates of capital gains tax to 18% for gains within the basic income band for basic rate taxpayers and to 24% for those who pay higher rate income tax. Those levels have risen to match the unchanging residential property rates. The changes are welcome and perhaps not as substantial as was widely speculated in advance. It is important that we look at comparators with neighbouring countries. Those rates, even after the changes, compare well with our European neighbours. In France, as the Minister already said, capital gains tax sits at 30%, rising to 34% for high earners. Our closest neighbour Ireland—often seen as a haven for entrepreneurs who feel that the UK is not a good place to do business—charges 33%, and in Germany it is charged at 25%, plus a 5.5% solidarity surcharge on the tax paid.

Clause 12 includes a long-needed reform in the treatment of carried interest, and I am pleased that the Government are proceeding carefully with this long-overdue measure, moving us towards a tax regime where carried interest is within the income tax framework.

These measures will, I believe, contribute to the crucial revenue that must be raised to fix the foundations of our economy and repair our public services. We need to remind ourselves of the words of George Dibb, the associate director of economic policy at the Institute for Public Policy Research, who said of the changes in the Budget:

“After at least a decade of under-investment, there is now real hope that the government can start to fix the UK’s economic foundations.”

2 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): We in the SNP and the Scottish Government believe in progressive taxation. I think that is evident from the changes we have made to income tax since those matters were devolved. We would like a more progressive influence in the changes before us, rather than simply clawing at allowances and increasing the rate. Nothing in clauses 7 to 12 is designed to make matters better in Scotland, but at least the Labour party is consistent on that.

Inheritance tax and capital gains tax are increasingly out of step with modern activity in the UK economy. As the IPPR points out, since the 1980s, household wealth in the UK has risen from three times the national income to more than seven times, yet over the same timeframe wealth taxes have not risen at all as a share of that income. Taxing unearned wealth more fairly and efficiently is a legitimate long-term ambition in a state where the economy is on life support. Taxpayers are left wondering from this Budget whether more tax rises are on the way, after a substantial lack of clarity from the Chancellor, who said a week or so ago that the Government would not come back for more tax rises, or indeed more borrowing, but has since refused to echo those rather injudicious remarks. If she does not have the confidence to stand by her own statements, it is hard to imagine the effect on business and investor confidence across the UK.

The Chancellor should have worked with economic experts, such as those at the IFS, to create a fairer and more growth-friendly capital gains tax, but instead she has been captured by the same old Treasury dogma that has served the UK so badly over recent decades. Capital gains tax raises a growing amount of revenue—about £15 billion last year—partly reflecting the increased role of wealth accumulation in the UK, but it is still less than 2% of all tax take, and although CGT is paid by about 350,000 people each year, two thirds of receipts are from just 12,000 people with an average gain of £4 million.

CGT rates vary significantly across assets, and are almost always significantly lower than income tax rates. That rate differential is unfair and creates undesirable distortions, including to what people invest in and how long they choose to work. The IFS has criticised the Chancellor for choosing simply to increase CGT rates with no effort to carry out what it describes as much-needed reform. It also describes the whole design of CGT as “flawed”, adding:

“There are steps the government could and should take to make the tax fairer and less harmful to economic growth and well-being.”

Moreover, the Centre for the Analysis of Taxation proposes further changes to CGT, including aligning capital gains tax rates with income tax rates, introducing allowances to incentivise investment, taxing the increase in an asset’s value when it is inherited, and implementing an exit tax to prevent individuals from dodging UK taxes on gains made while residing in the UK. It estimates that that package would generate £14 billion, but none of those measures is in the Bill.

The IFS says that if the Chancellor chose to raise CGT rates while leaving the flawed tax base unchanged, she would be choosing to raise some limited revenue at the expense of weakening savings and investment incentives, and of further distorting which assets people buy and how long they hold on to them. The IFS says that that would not be the decision of a Chancellor who is serious about growth. Well, what a portent that turned out to be. She did not reform CGT, and look what happened to growth: forecasts were down immediately after first contact with this inverse Midas-touch Chancellor. It is clear that, in preparing for the Budget, she could have done with a full hour or more with the IFS, but I doubt that she would have listened.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We come to the final Back-Bench contribution, and have saved the best until last. I call Bobby Dean.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Before I address capital gains tax directly, I will make a few short remarks about the state of the national conversation about tax more generally, which I think is highly relevant. I note that tax is always something to be “hit by” in politics—it is violent; we are “hammered” by it—so the debate ends up focusing on who is deserving or undeserving of such punishment. As a result, few organisations are viewed as legitimate targets for taxation. Very rarely do we in politics have the bravery to talk about the virtue of paying tax—what it pays for, how it benefits us all, and why collectively contributing to schools, hospitals and physical infrastructure is sensible investment that we should be proud to make.

That is where the political conversation falls slightly out of step with the mood of the public. Believe it or not, I have had conversations about tax on the doorstep, and I mostly meet people who are proud to make that contribution. Let me be clear: this is not some special plea to talk about tax in a warmer, fuzzier way in order to improve the civility of public discourse. Nor should it be confused for advocacy of a high-tax based economy. I raise that point because our distorted public conversation means that we end up with a dysfunctional tax system that is neither efficient nor equitable. Where we are with capital gains tax is a good example of that.

Decades of wrangling over whether capital gains tax stifles entrepreneurship or is merely a ruse for the rich often results in a pretty reductive focus on rates. It seems that that happened again in the Budget, and I fear that we have missed an opportunity to make that tax better. As others have explained in putting capital gains tax into context, it is paid by around 350,000 people and raises around 2% of total tax revenue, and 12,000 people account for two thirds of that revenue. That tax does

[Bobby Dean]

not necessarily affect a broad section of society, but it does play an important role in investment in the economy and in the overall sense of fairness in our system.

Let me start with the economy. It makes no sense to me for the Government to make changes to capital gains tax without sorting out the tax base. If we do not index capital gains for inflation, we are not really taxing the thing that we say we are taxing. We should be focused on the real gains—otherwise, we risk taxing those who simply hold on to an asset for a long time, and ultimately we end up discouraging long-term investment.

Secondly, we ought to be targeting capital gains tax at those making the larger gains—if large gains are to be had, those investments will be made anyway. Smaller gains, however—the stuff at the margins—are where investment decisions could be at risk. Raising the CGT allowance a bit would go a long way towards addressing that, as would designing better-targeted reliefs that more precisely encourage investment.

Finally, we come to capital gains tax rates, whose alignment with income tax rates is often called for. The Government have of course moved a bit on that, but a focus on rates alone means that an inherent unfairness remains. There would still be the sense that there is one rule for small businesses and another for the giants. When he appeared before the Treasury Committee, Paul Johnson of the IFS remarked on another unfairness: someone can simply leave the country for a few years and dispose of an assets overseas—somewhere like Monaco—and they are then no longer responsible for capital gains tax. That is another inherent unfairness.

Ultimately, with the proposed changes only, the system will continue to disproportionately benefit the very wealthiest. It is for that reason that I cannot support the measure. If it passes, I hope the Government will consider carefully the impact of the change in isolation, and whether further reforms are necessary in future. Our tax system needs to ensure that everybody pays their fair share, and I do not think the Government have quite got this one right yet.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We come to the Front-Bench wind-ups. Does the shadow Minister wish to speak?

Gareth Davies indicated dissent.

The Chairman: I call the Minister.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank hon. Members for their contributions to today's debate. I will take a few moments to respond to some of the points, and will then give the Government's views on the proposed amendments. If there are questions that I do not answer, I will write to hon. Members.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) for his important speech and agree with his points about much-needed reform to our tax system. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for her powerful speech and wholeheartedly agree with her constituent, who seems very principled and knowledgeable.

To respond to the points made by the Conservative spokesperson, the hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies), about the revenue impacts of the carried interest measure, the OBR-certified costings demonstrate that this measure raises revenue over the scorecard period. The Budget does deliver on the Government's manifesto commitments on tax: estimated revenues for these policies have been adjusted for final policy decisions and to account for underlying changes in the OBR's forecast, but overall, the hon. Gentleman may be interested to know that the tax measures raise over £1 billion more than was in the manifesto.

To answer the hon. Gentleman's question about why the changes are being made in-year, the in-year rate changes were made to protect Exchequer revenues from the impacts of forestalling. It is common practice for tax changes to take effect from the date of the Budget. As for anti-forestalling, we would not expect the anti-forestalling provisions to apply to an ordinary commercial sale of an asset where the contract was entered into prior to 30 October. Those provisions target those who enter into artificial arrangements to lock in the pre-Budget tax treatments.

The Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), talked about inflation indexation of CGT. Indexation previously existed when CGT rates were charged at income tax levels with a top rate of 40%. A rate schedule of 18% and 24% is significantly below those levels, so for the important reason of simplicity, indexation is not a part of the system.

New clause 1 would require the Government to present to Parliament a review of the capital gains tax package's impacts on long-term investment, disposable income across the distribution, and tax revenue. In deciding on these changes to capital gains tax, the Government have already considered all three factors. On long-term investment, the OBR assessed the CGT package to have no measure-specific macroeconomic impact. On impacts across incomes, distributional analysis for all Budget measures combined is set out in the "Impact on households" publication. The Government do not normally publish the impacts of individual measures. Finally, the Government's projection of the revenue raised by these CGT changes has been certified by the OBR and published in the Budget document. Every year, the Government publish the amount of CGT paid in the most recent tax year with available data, where table 3 breaks down gains by income. For those reasons, the proposed report is unnecessary, and I implore Members to reject the new clause.

New clause 4 would require the Government to publish a review within three months of the passing of this legislation covering various issues in connection with our reforms to the tax treatment of carried interest. As set out earlier, the CGT rates applicable to carried interest will increase to 32% from April 2025. This is a first step in advance of moving to a revised regime fully within the income tax framework from April 2026. The Government believe that their reforms will deliver increased fairness and place the tax rules on a more sustainable footing, while preserving our country's position as a global fund management hub. We will also be undertaking extensive technical consultation ahead of legislating for the revised regime in a future finance Bill, which the House will of course have the opportunity to scrutinise. We therefore do not consider that new clause 4 is a necessary addition to the Bill that is before us today.

Gareth Davies: I am very grateful to the Minister for explaining all the things she has just set out, but I did not quite get an answer to the specific question of why it costs HMRC £4.5 million to execute this tax rise, which will not raise any money in the next year or the year after. Could she explain why this specific measure that only affects 3,100 people costs HMRC £4.5 million, but other tax increases cost hundreds of thousands of pounds?

Tulip Siddiq: If the shadow Minister looks carefully at the documents we have published, he will find all his answers written out very clearly there.

New clause 5 would require the Government to publish an impact assessment of the changes to business asset disposal relief, and to compare the impact of those changes with the number of claims that would have been expected if the rate had not been changed. Every year, the Government publish capital gains tax statistics, which include the number of business asset disposal relief claims for the most recent tax year with available data. The number of claims in 2024-25 compared with upcoming tax years will therefore become public information in time. Meanwhile, the fiscal impact of the changes are out in the tax information and impacts note for this measure, which has been published online.

2.15 pm

It would not be practical for the Government to publish counterfactual comparisons for all tax changes, and doing so for business asset disposal relief would create an unsustainable precedent. The Government recognise that monitoring and evaluation are critical to maintaining the efficacy of any tax measures they introduce, and will continue them as appropriate. For these reasons, new clause 5 is not a necessary addition to the Bill, and I ask Members to reject it.

I hope I have been able to reassure Members who have tabled new clauses that, for the reasons I have set out, those additions and changes are not necessary. I therefore urge the Committee to reject new clauses 1, 4 and 5, and I commend clauses 7 to 12 and schedules 1 and 2 to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 7 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 1 agreed to.

Clauses 8 to 11 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 2 agreed to.

Clause 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause 5

BUSINESS ASSET DISPOSAL RELIEF: REVIEW OF INCREASE IN RATE

“(1) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must commission and publish an assessment of the expected impact of the provisions of section 8 on the number of Business Asset Disposal Relief claims involving the sale of a business.

(2) The assessment must compare estimates for the number of claims involving the sale of a business in the tax year 2024-25 with the number of such claims in the tax year 2025-26.

(3) The assessment must compare the impact under the provisions of section 8 with what impact could have been expected had the rate remained unchanged.”—(Gareth Davies.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 105, Noes 340.

Division No. 59]

[2.17 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Lam, Katie
Andrew, rh Stuart	Lamont, John
Argar, rh Edward	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Atkins, rh Victoria	Lockhart, Carla
Bacon, Gareth	Lopez, Julia
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Mak, Alan
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Mayhew, Jerome
Bedford, Mr Peter	McVey, rh Esther
Blackman, Bob	Medi, Llinos
Bool, Sarah	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Bowie, Andrew	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Moore, Robbie
Brandreth, Aphra	Morrissey, Joy
Burghart, Alex	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Mundell, rh David
Cartledge, James	Norman, rh Jesse
Cleverly, rh Mr James	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	O'Brien, Neil
Cocking, Lewis	Philp, rh Chris
Cooper, John	Pritchard, rh Mark
Costa, Alberto	Reed, David
Coutinho, rh Claire	Robertson, Joe
Cross, Harriet	Robinson, rh Gavin
Davies, Ann	Rosindell, Andrew
Davies, Gareth	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Davies, Mims	Shannon, Jim
Dewhurst, Charlie	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Simmonds, David
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Smith, Greg
Easton, Alex	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Evans, Dr Luke	Smith, Rebecca
Fox, Sir Ashley	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Spencer, Dr Ben
Freeman, George	Spencer, Patrick
French, Mr Louie	Stafford, Gregory
Fuller, Richard	Stephenson, Blake
Gale, rh Sir Roger	Stuart, rh Graham
Garnier, Mark	Swann, Robin
Glen, rh John	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Grant, Helen	Thomas, Bradley
Griffith, Andrew	Timothy, Nick
Griffiths, Alison	Trott, rh Laura
Harris, Rebecca	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Hinds, rh Damian	Vickers, Martin
Hoare, Simon	Vickers, Matt
Holmes, Paul	Whately, Helen
Hudson, Dr Neil	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Hunt, rh Jeremy	Wild, James
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Wilson, rh Sammy
Jenrick, rh Robert	Wood, Mike
Jopp, Lincoln	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Tellers for the Ayes:
Kruger, Danny	Rebecca Paul and
Lake, Ben	Mr Richard Holden

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Aldridge, Dan
Abbott, Jack	Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Abrahams, Debbie	Alexander, rh Heidi
Adam, Shokat	Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Ali, Rushanara
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Ali, Tahir
	Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena

Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)

Anderson, Callum

Anderson, Fleur

Antoniazzi, Tonia

Arthur, Dr Scott

Asato, Jess

Asser, James

Athwal, Jas

Atkinson, Catherine

Atkinson, Lewis

Bailey, Mr Calvin

Bailey, Olivia

Baker, Richard

Ballinger, Alex

Bance, Antonia

Barker, Paula

Barron, Lee

Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex

Baxter, Johanna

Beales, Danny

Beavers, Lorraine

Bell, Torsten

Benn, rh Hilary

Berry, Siân

Betts, Mr Clive

Billington, Ms Polly

Bishop, Matt

Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)

Blake, Rachel

Bloore, Chris

Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)

Bonavia, Kevin

Botterill, Jade

Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena

Brash, Mr Jonathan

Bryant, Chris

Buckley, Julia

Burgon, Richard

Burton-Sampson, David

Butler, Dawn

Byrne, Ian

Byrne, rh Liam

Cadbury, Ruth

Caliskan, Nesil

Campbell, rh Sir Alan

Campbell, Irene

Campbell, Juliet

Campbell-Savours, Markus

Carden, Dan

Carling, Sam

Champion, Sarah

Charters, Mr Luke

Chowns, Ellie

Clark, Feryal

Coleman, Ben

Collier, Jacob

Collinge, Lizzi

Collins, Tom

Conlon, Liam

Coombes, Sarah

Cooper, Andrew

Costigan, Deirdre

Cox, Pam

Craft, Jen

Creagh, Mary

Creasy, Ms Stella

Crichton, Torcuil

Curtis, Chris

Dalton, Ashley

Darlington, Emily

Davies, Jonathan

Davies, Paul

Davies, Shaun

Davies-Jones, Alex

Dean, Josh

Dearden, Kate

Denyer, Carla

Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh

Dickson, Jim

Dixon, Anna

Dixon, Samantha

Dollimore, Helena

Doughty, Stephen

Dowd, Peter

Downie, Graeme

Duncan-Jordan, Neil

Eccles, Cat

Edwards, Lauren

Edwards, Sarah

Efford, Clive

Egan, Damien

Elmore, Chris

Entwistle, Kirith

Esterson, Bill

Fahnbulleh, Miatta

Falconer, Mr Hamish

Farnsworth, Linsey

Fenton-Glynn, Josh

Ferguson, Mark

Fleet, Natalie

Fookes, Catherine

Foster, Mr Paul

Foxcroft, Vicky

Francis, Daniel

Frith, Mr James

Gardiner, Barry

Gelder, Anna

Gemmell, Alan

German, Gill

Gilbert, Tracy

Gill, Preet Kaur

Gittins, Becky

Glindon, Mary

Gosling, Jodie

Gould, Georgia

Grady, John

Griffith, Dame Nia

Hack, Amanda

Hall, Sarah

Hamilton, Paulette

Hardy, Emma

Harris, Carolyn

Hatton, Lloyd

Hayes, Helen

Hayes, Tom

Hazelgrove, Claire

Hendrick, Sir Mark

Hillier, Dame Meg

Hinchliff, Chris

Hinder, Jonathan

Hodgson, Mrs Sharon

Hopkins, Rachel

Hume, Alison

Huq, Dr Rupa

Hurley, Patrick

Hussain, Imran

Irons, Natasha

Jameson, Sally

Jermy, Terry

Jogee, Adam

Johnson, Kim

Jones, Gerald

Jones, Louise

Josan, Gurinder Singh

Joseph, Sojan

Juss, Warinder

Kane, Chris

Kaur, Satvir

Kendall, rh Liz

Kinnock, Stephen

Kirkham, Jayne

Kitchen, Gen

Kumar, Sonia

Kumaran, Uma

Kyrke-Smith, Laura

Lamb, Peter

Lavery, Ian

Law, Noah

Leadbeater, Kim

Leishman, Brian

Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma

Lewin, Andrew

Lewis, Clive

Lightwood, Simon

Long Bailey, Rebecca

MacAlister, Josh

Macdonald, Alice

MacNae, Andy

Madders, Justin

Mahmood, rh Shabana

Martin, Amanda

Maskell, Rachael

Mather, Keir

Mayer, Alex

McCarthy, Kerry

McCluskey, Martin

McDonagh, Dame Siobhain

McDonald, Andy

McDonald, Chris

McDonnell, rh John

McDougall, Blair

McEvoy, Lola

McGovern, Alison

McIntyre, Alex

McKee, Gordon

McKenna, Kevin

McKinnell, Catherine

McMahon, Jim

McMorrin, Anna

McNally, Frank

McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)

Midgley, Anneliese

Minns, Ms Julie

Mishra, Navendu

Mohamed, Abtisam

Mohamed, Iqbal

Moon, Perran

Morden, Jessica

Morgan, Stephen

Morris, Grahame

Morris, Joe

Mullane, Margaret

Murphy, Luke

Murray, Chris

Murray, rh Ian

Murray, James

Murray, Katrina

Myer, Luke

Naish, James

Naismith, Connor

Nandy, rh Lisa

Nash, Pamela

Niblett, Samantha

Nichols, Charlotte

Norris, Alex

Onn, Melanie

Opher, Dr Simon

Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena

Osborne, Kate

Osborne, Tristan

Owatemi, Taiwo

Owen, Sarah

Paffey, Darren

Pakes, Andrew

Patrick, Matthew

Payne, Michael

Peacock, Stephanie

Pearce, Jon

Pennycook, Matthew

Perkins, Mr Toby

Phillips, Jess

Pinto-Duschinsky, David

Pitcher, Lee

Platt, Jo

Pollard, Luke

Powell, rh Lucy

Poynton, Gregor

Prinsley, Peter

Quigley, Mr Richard

Qureshi, Yasmin

Race, Steve

Ramsay, Adrian

Ranger, Andrew

Reader, Mike

Reed, rh Steve

Reeves, Ellie

Reid, Joani

Reynolds, Emma

Rhodes, Martin

Ribeiro-Addy, Bell

Richards, Jake

Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny

Rigby, Lucy

Robertson, Dave

Roca, Tim

Rushworth, Sam

Russell, Mrs Sarah

Rutland, Tom

Ryan, Oliver

Sackman, Sarah

Sandher, Dr Jeevun

Scrogg, Michelle

Sewards, Mr Mark

Shah, Naz

Shanker, Baggy

Shanks, Michael

Siddiq, Tulip

Simons, Josh

Slaughter, Andy

Slinger, John

Smith, Cat

Smith, David

Smith, Jeff

Smyth, Karin

Snell, Gareth

Sobel, Alex

Stainbank, Euan

Stevens, rh Jo

Stevenson, Kenneth

Stewart, Elaine

Stone, Will

Strathern, Alistair

Strickland, Alan

Stringer, Graham

Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie

Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

Anna Turley and
Christian Wakeford

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 15

INCREASE IN RATE OF ENERGY (OIL AND GAS)
PROFITS LEVY

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Clauses 16 to 18 stand part.

Schedule 3.

New clause 2—*Report on fiscal effects: relief for investment expenditure*—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of the passing of this Act, lay before Parliament a report setting out the impact of the measures contained in clause 16 of this Act on tax revenue.”

This new clause would require the Government to produce a report setting out the fiscal impact of the Bill's changes to the Energy Profits Levy investment expenditure relief.

New clause 3—*Changes to energy (oil and gas) profits levy: review*—

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act coming into force, publish a review of the expected impact of the measures in sections 15 to 18 on—

- (a) employment in the UK oil and gas industry;
- (b) capital expenditure in the UK oil and gas industry;
- (c) UK oil and gas production;
- (d) UK oil and gas demand; and
- (e) the Scottish economy and economic growth in Scotland.”

2.30 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): At the Budget in October, the Chancellor set out the decisions that we are taking to restore economic stability, put the public finances on a firm footing, and embed fiscal responsibility in the work of Government. Having wiped the slate clean of the mess we inherited, our Government can now focus on boosting the public and

private investment that is essential for sustainable long-term growth. It is through sustainable economic growth across the UK that we will create wealth and provide security, making people across the country better off.

That goal of raising living standards in every part of the UK so that working people have more money in their pocket is at the heart of the Government's plan for change that the Prime Minister set out last week. That plan also set out the Government's commitment to securing home-grown energy, and to protecting bill payers by putting us on track to secure at least 95% clean power by 2030. Making the transition to home-grown energy has required us to take immediate action to unblock investment, including deciding to reverse the de facto ban on onshore wind. The Government have their part to play, alongside the private sector, in making sure that investment happens on the scale and at the pace that we need. That is why the clauses that we are debating are so important—they are a key mechanism for raising the funding that is needed for that investment to be delivered.

We are taking a responsible approach that recognises the role of businesses and their employees in the energy industries of today and tomorrow. Since we formed a Government, my colleagues and I have been working closely with the sector affected by the energy profits levy to make sure that the transition is managed in a way that supports jobs in existing and future industries. Our approach recognises that oil and gas will have a role to play in the energy mix for many years to come, during the transition, and it balances that with ensuring that oil and gas help to raise the revenue that we need to drive investment towards the energy transition. Our legislation delivers that approach, and I welcome the chance to set out the details of how it does so.

The clauses that we are debating concern the energy profits levy, a temporary additional tax on profits from oil and gas exploration and production in the UK and on the UK continental shelf. The levy was introduced by the previous Government in response to the extraordinary profits being made by oil and gas companies—and, it is fair to say, in response to substantial political pressure from Labour Members.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Does the Minister believe that oil and gas companies are still making extraordinary profits?

James Murray: I believe that it is fair that the oil and gas industry makes a reasonable contribution to the energy transition. We need to ensure that during the transition from oil and gas, which will play a key role in our energy mix for years to come, the industry contributes to the new, clean energy of the future. The way to have a responsible, managed transition is to work with the industry and make sure that it makes a fair contribution, but to not shy away from making that transition at the scale and pace needed.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Let me try to understand the Minister's logic. First, he recognises that we will need oil and gas. Secondly, he is going to tax oil and gas companies. Thirdly, he is telling them that his Government are creating an environment in which there is no future for oil and gas, but he still expects them to invest. Where is the logic?

James Murray: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has given me a chance to set out why the Government plan is the right and balanced approach. We are ensuring that the oil and gas sector is supported in making the contribution that we know it will to our energy mix for many years to come, while asking it to contribute to the transition to clean energy. The oil and gas industry recognises that a transition to clean energy is under way. It wants to support investment and jobs in the industry but also to contribute to the transition. Taking a fair and balanced approach is the right way to protect the jobs and industries of today and tomorrow and, crucially, to protect bill payers, giving them permanently lower bills and greater energy independence. *[Interruption.]*

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): In the last financial year, the oil and gas industry made £6.1 billion in profit, despite the chuntering from Opposition Members. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Conservatives introduced the energy levy? We are simply ensuring that our oil and gas sector pays an equivalent sum, so that we can transition to a green energy future. This money is necessary for that transition to occur.

James Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are asking oil and gas companies to make a fair and reasonable contribution towards our transition to clean energy. That transition is under way, and it is important for oil and gas companies to make a contribution, but that should happen in a way that protects the jobs and industries of today and tomorrow.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The oil and gas giants were making eye-watering profits when the Conservative Government finally introduced a levy, although it had a loophole that let the oil and gas companies off the hook. The Government should support the Liberal Democrat amendment, which demonstrates how much of a missed opportunity that was, and how much money we could have raised, had the loophole been closed earlier.

James Murray: I am not entirely clear that that is what the Liberal Democrat amendment does. We have been clear that our intention is to end unjustifiably generous allowances. That is exactly what we are doing by abolishing the core investment allowance, which was unique to oil and gas taxation and is not available to any other sector in the economy.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): New research published in the last few days has found that fossil fuel companies reported profits of nearly \$0.5 trillion during the 2022 energy crisis. By contrast, people struggled with fuel poverty and had to choose between heating and eating. One in seven households in my constituency is in fuel poverty. Does the Minister agree that the ability to extend and increase the energy profits levy is a key lever for addressing this imbalance and supporting households?

The Chairman: Order. That was neatly done, but interventions have to be very closely related to what we are debating here and now.

James Murray: I hope that my hon. Friend's constituents will benefit from lower bills as a result of the investment that we are ensuring, by the public and private sectors, in the clean energy sources of the future.

We knew, when the Conservatives introduced the energy profits levy, that the extraordinary oil and gas profits were driven by global circumstances, including resurgent demand after covid-19, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Households in the UK, however, were particularly badly hit by higher oil and gas prices, as the Government at the time had failed to invest adequately in energy independence, or in measures such as home insulation. When the energy profits levy was introduced, an 80% investment allowance was also introduced, and this was later reduced to 29% when the levy rate increased from 25% to 35% in January 2023. An 80% decarbonisation investment allowance was later put in place for decarbonisation expenditure, which is money spent on the reduction of emissions from the production of oil and gas. The levy was initially set at 25%, but the previous Government increased it to 35% and extended it beyond 2025, first to 2028, and later to 2029.

As I mentioned, the Government recognise the continued role for oil and gas in the UK's energy mix during the energy transition. We are committed to managing the transition in a way that supports jobs in existing and future industries, recognising that our offshore workers have the vital skills to unlock the clean industries of the future. I put on record my thanks to the offshore workers I met in Aberdeen in August for giving me some of their time and their views when I was there for a meeting with Offshore Energies UK and representatives of the sector. As I mentioned, it is essential that we drive both public and private investment in the transition to clean energy. Clause 15 therefore increases the energy profits levy by three percentage point—from 35% to 38%—from 1 November 2024. The clause also sets out the rules for apportioning profits for accounting periods that straddle the start date. As I have made clear, the money raised by these changes will help to support the transition to clean energy, enhancing our energy security and providing sustainable jobs for the future.

Clause 16 concerns allowances in the levy. The clause removes the 29% core investment allowance for general expenditure incurred on or after 1 November 2024, as I mentioned to the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). The Government have been clear about our intention to end unjustifiably generous allowances, and that is exactly what we are doing by abolishing the core investment allowance. We are bringing the level of relief for investment in the sector broadly in line with the level of capital allowances available to other companies operating across the rest of the economy through full expensing, which we have committed to maintaining. The energy profit levy's decarbonisation allowance will be retained to support the sector in reducing emissions.

Qualifying expenditure includes money spent on electrification of production, or on reducing venting and flaring. The retention of the decarbonisation allowance reflects the Government's commitment to facilitating cleaner home-grown energy. However, in the light of the increase to the levy, clause 16 also reduces the rate of the decarbonisation allowance to 66% in order to maintain the same cash value of the tax relief per £100 of investment.

Clause 17 extends the sunset of the levy by one year from 31 March 2029 to 31 March 2030. To provide the oil and gas industry with long-term certainty and confidence in the fiscal regime, we are retaining the levy's price floor, the energy security investment mechanism.

Dave Doogan: Certainty is only good if it relates to a positive outlook, not a negative outlook. The hon. Member for Gordon and Buchan (Harriet Cross) asked a clear question about the duration. It was not about whether the sector pays fair taxes; we all believe that people should pay fair taxes. Does the Minister still believe that the industry is making extraordinary profits?

James Murray: I would like to explain to the hon. Gentleman how the energy security investment mechanism works, because that, to be fair, was put in place by the previous Government, and we are maintaining it. It says that if prices drop below a certain threshold for six months, the energy profits levy ceases early. That gives some certainty and predictability to the oil and gas sector. If prices go below that level, the sector can have confidence that the energy security investment mechanism will end the levy early. If that does not happen, the levy will continue, as we have said, until March 2030.

I am keen—I will set out a few more details later—to engage with the oil and gas sector on the regime post the energy profits levy, because it is important for oil and gas companies making decisions about investment to have certainty about what will happen up until March 2030, and to understand what the regime might be like thereafter. That is why I am looking forward to my conversations with the sector on what the post energy profits levy regime will look like.

Long-term certainty and confidence is being provided to the oil and gas sector by our retention of the levy's price floor, the energy security investment mechanism, which I was explaining to the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan). It means that the levy will cease permanently if oil and gas prices fall below a set level for a sustained period. Furthermore, as I also just said, to provide stability for the long term, the Government will publish a consultation in early 2025 on how the tax regime will respond to price shocks once the energy profits levy comes to an end. That will give oil and gas producers and their investors predictability and certainty on the future of the fiscal regime, which will support their ability to continue investing, while also ensuring that the nation receives a fair return at a time of exceptional crisis.

2.45 pm

Finally, clause 18 and schedule 3 relate to the decommissioning of oil and gas assets that are repurposed for use in carbon storage installations and pipelines. Carbon capture, usage and storage, or CCUS, is likely to play an essential role in meeting our net zero targets. The UK's estimated 78 billion tonnes of CO₂ storage capacity presents an opportunity for us to become a global leader in the provision of CO₂ services and storage. The potential to make use of assets from the UK's oil and gas sector is an opportunity that will present cost savings and quicker delivery times for certain CCUS projects.

It is right that the oil and gas owner of an asset being repurposed for CCUS pays for the ultimate decommissioning of that asset. That approach ensures that funds are available to return the asset's environment to its natural state at the end of its use in CCUS. In such cases, the Energy Act 2023 requires the oil and gas company to pay an amount equal to the cost of decommissioning into a decommissioning fund to make provision for the repurposed asset's decommissioning

liability when the CCUS project comes to an end. The oil and gas company would be entitled to tax relief on the decommissioning expenditure if it decommissioned the asset itself, rather than selling it to be repurposed, yet there is currently no such relief for any payments made into a decommissioning fund, and that disincentivises the repurposing of assets for CCUS.

In order to ensure that the tax is not a blocker to the repurposing of oil and gas assets, the changes made by clause 18 and schedule 3 will bring the tax treatment of payments into decommissioning funds for repurposed assets into line with the tax relief available when oil and gas companies decommission assets at the end of their production life. This will accelerate delivery times and reduce costs for CCUS projects, while ensuring that the oil and gas companies that support the transition by repurposing are not disadvantaged. The cost of decommissioning is not an allowable expense with the energy profits levy, so to reflect that, payments received for these assets will not be subject to the levy.

To conclude, the Government are committed to protecting billpayers by securing our future home-grown energy supply. Our plans will put us on track to deliver at least 95% clean power by 2030 and help accelerate the UK to net zero. Taken together, the changes made in clauses 15 to 18 will raise an additional £2.3 billion over the scorecard period. That funding is crucial for the investment needed in our future energy supply and to support our efforts to deliver a world-class CCUS industry in the UK. They represent a crucial investment in the future of our country. I commend the clauses to the Committee.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Davies: I rise to speak on behalf of the official Opposition on new clause 3, which stands in the name of the shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride).

Clauses 15 to 18 concern the taxation of the oil and gas industry, which meets 75% of the UK's household and industrial energy needs, with 50% of that need being met by the North sea. The sector supports more than 200,000 high-skilled jobs in this country, and that talent, along with the rest of the supply chain, will be crucial to our domestic energy transition. These realities underscore the imperative of a smooth and efficient transition and a fiscal regime that facilitates that, not least because the timeline for investment in the oil and gas industry is so long. If the fiscal regime is not calibrated correctly, the damage may be irreversible and the costs will be significant.

To recap the measures in the Bill, clause 15 increases the rate of the energy profits levy from 35% to 38%, bringing the headline tax rate on the sector up to 78%. Clause 16 removes the 29% investment allowance and reduces the rate of the decarbonisation investment allowance to 66%, so that the cash value of that allowance remains the same. Clause 17 extends the energy profits levy to 2030, at which point the Government are committing to implementing a successor regime to respond to price shocks once the levy expires. Clause 18 and schedule 3 legislate for certain payments into decommissioning funds to be treated as decommissioning expenditure so that they can attract tax relief.

[Gareth Davies]

The question that many are asking is this: do these measures add up to a fiscal regime that facilitates a smooth and efficient energy transition? Not according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, which concludes that on average over the forecast period, capital expenditure will be 26% lower, oil production 6.3% lower and gas production 9.2% lower compared with our March forecasts. Those are dramatic movements. The University of Aberdeen has warned:

“A rise in the EPL and loss of investment and capital allowances may have the unintended effect of accelerating decommissioning and decelerating the energy transition as companies face an additional cost burden.”

The Government have thankfully carried out a partial U-turn, retaining the decarbonisation allowance and the 100% first-year allowance introduced by the Conservative party, but if they were persuaded of the importance of those investment allowances and that removing them would do more harm than good, why persist with removing the main 29% investment allowance? What was it about that relief compared with the others that made them want to scrap it?

The Government talk about closing loopholes—we saw how well that went with carried interest—but these measures will contribute just 1% of the new revenue raised by the Budget across this Parliament. Does the Minister really think it is worth jeopardising some 50% of our domestic gas supply for that? The measures in the Budget essentially throw a massive spanner in the works for oil and gas, and it is unclear exactly what the Government's rationale is for doing that.

When we brought in the levy, it was to tax extraordinary profits in extraordinary times. The revenue that we raised contributed to our efforts through policies such as the energy price guarantee and the energy bills support scheme to reduce energy bills for the British people. Today, as those extraordinary circumstances subside, Labour is ratcheting up the levy. That sends a mixed message to the industry ahead of the consultation on a successor regime. The terms of that regime will supposedly be set by the need to respond to price shocks, yet the Government's justification for these measures has nothing to do with price shocks. Instead, they are all dressed up in language about the sector making a “fair contribution”, as the Minister said, to the Energy Secretary's environmental ideological ambitions. What is the Government's vision for the taxation of oil and gas in this United Kingdom—temporary windfall taxes or permanent climate levies? The Bill suggests the latter. I would be grateful for the Minister specifically commenting on that when he responds.

One way in which the Minister could give an indication and provide some long-term certainty would be to confirm further the future of the energy security investment mechanism, which he mentioned. As he kindly said, we introduced the ESIM so that when prices returned to normal levels, the energy profits levy would end; no more windfall profits would mean no more windfall tax. Will he confirm that the ESIM will remain in place up to 2030? I think he said so at the Dispatch Box, but I would be grateful for his reconfirming its end date. Will he go further and confirm that it will remain in the same condition as today? Will the price floor continue to be consumer prices index-adjusted?

The Treasury and the Minister have said that the ESIM will be retained, but the industry would like further confirmation, as I have set out. Will he also write to me with the Treasury's latest modelling of future oil and gas prices to prove that the expected revenues are not at the expense of the ESIM? That modelling will be important for us to understand and get that reassurance and certainty on the ESIM. Having been in the Treasury, I know that that modelling is continually reviewed and produced; I would be grateful if he would write to me with that.

These are not purely academic questions. Our concern is for the hundreds of thousands of people employed by the UK oil and gas industry, for the UK's energy security and for the efficient and smooth energy transition that we all care about. The Government should be not ideological but empirical in their approach, which is why we have tabled new clause 3, which would require a review of the impact of these measures on employment, investment, production, demand and the whole Scottish economy. If the Government have already made detailed assessments on those specific areas, we would be grateful for the Minister publishing them.

On every measure, the Budget has not survived contact with reality. Growth has been downgraded, real incomes depressed and business investment reduced, with broken promises and credibility completely shattered. It is not so much that the Labour Government take a different view on economic matters; it is that they take the wrong view. Labour is the party of the tax rise that loses money. We are the party of the tax cut that raises revenue. That is why Labour Governments always leave office with more unemployment, larger debt and higher taxes. They always run out of other people's money, and this Government are set to do so in record time.

The Chairman of Ways and Means: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson once again.

Daisy Cooper: At the heart of the debate is a stark injustice, understood by every man, woman and child on the streets of Great Britain. In the last few years, oil and gas giants have made eye-watering profits—in many cases, they are profits that they did not expect to make—and they have made them off the back of Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine and global supply chain issues that caused energy prices to soar. At the same time, people have seen their living standards drop and their energy prices soar. In too many cases, people have had to choose between heating and eating.

We Liberal Democrats were the first party to call for a tax on oil and gas windfall profits back in October 2021, but it was not until May 2022 that the previous Government eventually introduced the energy profits levy. It was half-hearted and woefully late. If it had been brought in when we had called for it, there would have been additional revenue to reduce people's energy bills and launch an emergency home insulation scheme, reducing energy consumption, which would have been good for the climate, and reducing people's bills, which would have been good for their pockets.

The previous Government effectively let oil and gas giants off the hook, by initially setting the energy price levy at just 25% and putting in place a massive loophole in the form of the investment allowance. That allowed the oil and gas giants to get away with vast sums at

taxpayers' expense, with the excuse of investments that they would have made anyway. In essence, the Conservatives gave them tax relief on polluting activity when they should have been doing everything to raise funds to reduce people's bills and urgently insulate homes.

Thanks to the investment allowance—the big loophole—in 2022, Shell admitted that it had paid zero windfall tax despite making the largest global profit in its 115-year history: a profit of £31 billion. As some colleagues in the Committee have referred to, energy prices have come down since those record levels of 2022, but the oil and gas producers have still seen huge profits. In 2023, Shell saw its profit come down from £31 billion, but it still made £22.3 billion.

Harriet Cross: How much of that profit was made in the UK versus globally?

Daisy Cooper: To be honest, I do not know what the distinction is between global profits and UK profits. The point is that the levy is put on UK profits made out of UK operations. I hope that the hon. Lady will agree that when her constituents cannot afford to put their heating on, she should not miss the opportunity to raise taxes from the big oil and gas companies.

As I said, Shell made a profit of £22.3 billion in 2023, and BP saw profit of £11 billion, its second highest in a decade. I hope the Committee agrees that where those profits are made on UK operations, they should pay their fair share. We are glad that the current Government have listened to calls from Liberal Democrats and others and finally scrapped the unfair investment allowance loophole, but we would like the Minister to give the Committee some clarity on how much money will be raised, particularly through the abolition of the carve-out. By extension, we would be able to see how much money could have been raised under the previous Government but was gifted to the large gas giants. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members may not like it, but their constituents are choosing between heating and eating. People should know just how much money could have been raised and how much will now be raised through this measure.

3 pm

I would like to press the Minister on the specific changes to the EPL legislated for in the Bill. I understand that the headline rate of 78% was selected to match that in Norway, but I wonder whether the Government had considered going any further and looked, for example, at a headline rate of 80%. Was there a cost-benefit analysis? Some of the biggest oil and gas producers in the world may well be able to afford to pay a little more, and the additional tax revenue would be a big help for our public services—it could have helped avert the cut to the winter fuel payment. Will the Minister confirm that the Government intend to publish Treasury analysis on how much revenue could be raised from each 1p increase in the headline rate of the windfall tax?

Our constituents understand the stark injustice that the amendment will address. I hope the Minister will accept it, be transparent and show just how much money it will raise to help put public services back on their feet.

Harriet Cross: I will speak to clauses 15 to 18 briefly, but mainly to new clause 3 in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride). It would require the Chancellor to publish within three

months a review of the expected changes introduced by the Bill on employment, capital expenditure, production, demand and the economy. It is inherently sensible, and considers the importance of the oil and gas sector to regional and national employment and economic growth in the UK.

On the need to review the impact on employment, 82% of direct jobs in the oil and gas sector are located in Scotland. My Gordon and Buchan constituency is at the heart of that. New clause 3 would review the impact of the changes to employment across the country, as it is not just direct jobs that are on the line but supply chain and other indirect jobs. Of those, 90,000 are in Scotland and 200,00 are across the UK.

Dave Doogan: The hon. Member highlights the economic consequences of this heading south on jobs in Scotland. Is she surprised and disappointed, as I am, that not a single Scottish Labour MP has turned up to take part in this vital debate?

Harriet Cross: We were saying a moment ago how extraordinary it is that they are not here to stand up for their main industry. That shows how much they value or care about jobs across Scotland.

We are seeing warning signs already of the impact of these measures. Just a week after the Budget, Apache confirmed that it would cease operations in the North sea, saying:

“The onerous financial impact of the EPL, combined with the substantial investment that will be necessary to comply with regulatory requirements, makes production of hydrocarbons beyond 2029 uneconomic.”

According to the Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce, 100,000 jobs may be at risk across the UK because of the changes. Offshore Energies UK says that 35,000 jobs directly related to projects that may not now go ahead are at risk. New clause 3, which would allow the Government the opportunity to assess and account for the impact of the Bill's changes on jobs relating to the oil and gas sector, the supply chain and the wider economy, should be welcomed across the Committee.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): On the impact that increased tax on the industry will have on jobs, was my hon. Friend as disappointed as I was to hear the Liberal Democrats talking only about how much cash can be raised from an industry, without asking how many jobs would be affected across Scotland and the UK, or about the impact on the economy as a whole?

Harriet Cross: Absolutely; sometimes there is a complete disconnect in this place between how much we can tax and squeeze something dry and what that does to investment. These companies, especially the global ones, do not have to invest in the UK—they can invest across the world. They are choosing to invest here at the moment, and therefore we get jobs, opportunities and employment. That investment can go abroad, and if it does, it will take jobs with it, to the detriment of all of us, but particularly us in north-east Scotland.

Wera Hobhouse: Does the hon. Lady not recognise that we are in a transition period, which we need in order to get to net zero? Of course, we need to protect jobs, but the transition to net zero is essential.

Harriet Cross: I recognise that, which is why it is so important that we protect the jobs and the investment. The companies in our supply chain have the skills and expertise that will drive the transition, as will the investment that comes in, and that is why we need to keep them.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Lady makes a good point about the mobility of investment in the oil and gas industry. Is it not ironic that, since we will need oil and gas, if we tax companies on production in the United Kingdom, they will simply produce elsewhere, other Governments will get the revenue from the tax on that production and we will pay more for imports?

Harriet Cross: Exactly. There must be a balance between production and demand—I will come to demand later. There is no point reducing our domestic production while our demand stays the same, because we will only fill the gap with oil and gas from abroad, which is produced with a higher carbon intensity in poorer working environments, where overseas jobs and investment will take precedence over investment at home. It makes no sense that while we are using oil and gas—the Minister himself confirmed that we will be for a while—we do not prioritise taking it from our own North sea domestic basins.

New clause 3 also asks for a review on capital expenditure and investment in the UK. In Scotland alone, oil and gas contributed £19 billion of gross standard volume. In the UK, it contributed £27 billion. A 2022 report by Experian showed that for every £1 million of investment by the oil and gas industry, 14 jobs and £2.1 million of GVA are added. This industry is blatantly a net benefit to the UK and the Exchequer, and one in which we should encourage investment and capital expenditure, not an environment where the returns do not justify the risk of investment.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies) said, the OBR's own figures show that capital expenditure will fall by 26%, and therefore production of oil by 6.3% and gas by 9.2%, because of these changes. We must ask, can the UK afford this? Maybe those were the parameters that the Exchequer and the Treasury are looking for, if they see them as allowable. But if that is the case, what assessment has been made of the impact on the economy and jobs across the UK?

The OEUK has put the projected drop in production down to a rapid decline due to underinvestment over the decade. Under new clause 3, we can assess the impact of the changes to the EPL and head this off to begin with because, as I said, it is important that while we have demand, we have production. It has been confirmed that we will need oil and gas in the UK for years to come, but through the changes to the EPL in the Bill, in particular clauses 15 and 16, which increase the EPL by 3% and remove the investment allowances, the Government are choosing to make our homegrown domestic energy sector so uncompetitive that current investment falls away and future investment is no longer on the cards.

We cannot afford to lose investment because, as I said, it will drive the transition. It is so important that it is protected now, to help us bring the transition forward quickly and efficiently into the future. Clauses 15 to 18 were introduced without adequate consultation on the

impact assessment. New clause 3 simply asks for proper scrutiny of their impact. If the Government are confident in their approach, why resist a responsible request for transparency? My Gordon and Buchan constituents, and people in Scotland working in the oil and gas sector and across the UK, deserve to understand how these changes will impact their livelihoods.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before I call Dave Doogan, I remind Members that if they wish to speak, they need to be bobbing consistently—I cannot read people's minds to put together a speaking list.

Dave Doogan: The changes to the EPL, particularly those set out in clauses 15 and 17, will have a hugely damaging effect on jobs and the Scottish economy. This is also an inauspicious day for Scotland in this so-called United Kingdom as Norway's sovereign wealth fund records a €1.7 trillion breakthrough, while Scotland's oil wealth has been squandered by successive Westminster Governments. Norway gets financial security in perpetuity; Scotland gets Labour's bedroom tax, cuts to winter fuel payments for our elderly and the highest energy prices in the G20—that is the Union dividend wrapped up and served on a plate right there. More than £400 billion has flowed from our waters to the Treasury over the years, with very little coming back in the other direction. Rather than reverse the train, the Labour Government have, with this increase to the EPL, chosen to accelerate it.

The cumulative effect of clauses 15 to 18 will sound the death knell for Scotland's hydrocarbon production in advance, crucially, of the transition—economically illiterate, fiscally incompetent and with industrial suicide as the result. A windfall tax is supposed to be a tax on extraordinary profits, yet the extraordinarily high global oil and gas prices that preceded the introduction of the tax have long since abated. Through these changes, the Labour party jeopardises investment in Scotland's offshore energies and risks the future of our skilled workforce and our ability to hit net zero while employing those workers. Analysis from Offshore Energies UK shows that the increase and extension of the EPL risks costing the economy £13 billion and putting 35,000 jobs at risk.

The analysis from OEUK also shows a collapse in viable capital investment offshore under these changes from £14.1 billion to £2.3 billion in the period '25-29. It is increasingly apparent that the Government do not really understand how investment horizons work offshore. They are not on a month-to-month basis; they take years to work up. This loss of economic value impacts on not only the core sector, but domestic supply chain companies, many of whom exist in my constituency, which have an essential role to play in the just transition.

The Labour party promised that there would be no cliff edge, yet it has concocted one for the 35,000 workers whose jobs this EPL change puts at risk. Labour had claimed that these changes would keep the UK in line with Norway, but the regime after Labour's changes cannot be compared to that of Norway, which allows companies a maximum £78 of relief per £100 expenditure—in the UK, this relief would be £46.25. After these past couple of weeks, I am given to wondering if those on the Treasury Front Bench can actually count.

Changes to the EPL will hinder the just transition. The Government argue that the reduction in the rate of the decarbonisation investment allowance to 66% will

maintain the overall cumulative value of relief for investment expenditure following the rate increase, reflecting the fact that this relief will increase in value against a higher levy rate. However, the policy still reflects a political choice by Labour to deprioritise investment in decarbonisation. Rather than allowing more valuable decarbonisation relief as the solitary positive by-product of its tax hike, Labour has striven to ensure that there is absolutely no silver lining to this fiscal attack cloud on Scotland's energy industry.

Mr Snowden: At the heart of this, when we have comparisons to Norway, is a sheer focus on trying to squeeze as much taxation out of the industry as possible, without a focus on how to become more competitive. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that what we need for jobs and for energy security in the UK is to compare ourselves to the most competitive oil and gas economies in the world, and not those that squeeze and tax the most out of the industry and kill jobs?

Dave Doogan: Exactly. The hon. Gentleman raises the question of jobs, and the Government are playing fast and loose with jobs in the oil and gas sector. They are playing Russian roulette. They do not seem to understand that when what they have got wrong comes home to roost, they cannot just say, "Sorry, we got that wrong." When it is gone, it is gone—they cannot bring it back. This is 2024, not 1972. We are already in the closing chapter of the sector; it will not be coming back. This Government seem to completely misunderstand that.

The simple truth is that the UK state cannot meet net zero or create green growth if Labour's policies to hack away at investment in both the domestic workforce and the sector are allowed to progress. It is clear that the Labour party is abandoning Scotland's existing energy sector, and putting at risk the just transition into the bargain. With these changes to the EPL, Labour will be creating the worst of all worlds: it will starve industry of investment, sacrifice the jobs of those who can deliver net zero, threaten energy security, keep energy bills high and harm the economy of Scotland, while at the very same time failing to invest the money required to truly deliver against a green transition.

3.15 pm

Analysis from OEUK shows that the UK oil and gas sectors' total tax yield under Labour's increase to the EPL will peak in 2026 before declining, compared with the previous scenario, which would continue to increase Treasury receipts over the period. The analysis shows that while the expected tax take from Scotland's oil and gas producers would increase in the very short term, ultimately, over the remainder of the period, it will result in a £12 billion loss in receipts to the Treasury compared with the current regime. It is heads the sector wins and tails the Government lose.

If the Labour party does not care about the jobs that will be cost by this policy, the harm it will do to our prospects for a just transition or the damage to the Scottish economy, surely it can see that a tax increase that reeks of incoherent desperation and reduces tax receipts to the tune of £12 billion is, at the very least, suboptimal. I do not expect the Government to take it from me, but they might want to pay attention to the first one heading for the door, Apache, which said:

"The onerous financial impact of the EPL, combined with the substantial investment that will be necessary to comply with regulatory requirements, makes production of hydrocarbons beyond 2029 uneconomic."

OEUK has said that this policy

"will undermine the UK offshore energy sector's ability to support the Government's overarching goal of driving economic growth", and that it will trigger an

"accelerated decline of domestic production and a corresponding reduction in taxes...and jobs supported, and the wider economic value generated."

The chief economist at the Institute of Directors has said that the autumn tax rises have

"dented confidence in the environment for business in the UK."

I do not expect the Government to listen to me, but they really should listen to those at the forefront of our invaluable energy sector.

In closing, I ask the Minister to address this point directly: what impact assessments have the Government made of the investment horizon for oil and gas in the North sea?

Wera Hobhouse: I rise to speak briefly in support of new clause 2. I welcome the Government finally scrapping the unfair investment allowance loophole for the oil and gas giants, which the Liberal Democrats have advocated for and called for since the previous Government introduced the levy—too late, and half-heartedly—in May 2022. Oil and gas companies made eye-watering profits off the back of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and global supply chain problems that caused energy prices to soar. While the oil and gas giants saw record profits, my constituents in Bath and others across the country faced a cost of living crisis.

The previous Government have a lot to answer for. They sat and watched as the oil and gas giants lined their pockets off the back of people struggling with their bills. It did not have to be that way. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members do not want to hear it, but it did not have to be that way. Those were the political choices the previous Government made.

The measures announced by the Government in this Bill are welcome, in particular the removal of the 29% investment allowance except for investments on decarbonisation. This has been a Liberal Democrat policy, and I am pleased the Government have picked up on it and that it will now become a reality.

We Liberal Democrats were the first to call for a tax on oil and gas windfall profits back in October 2021. While the previous Government did eventually introduce the energy profits levy, they did so half-heartedly and woefully late in May 2022. It matters that we repeat that again and again: it is something that the previous Government failed to do. That Government let the oil and gas giants off the hook by putting in place a massive loophole in the form of the investment allowance. It was thanks to that allowance that in 2022, Shell admitted it had paid zero windfall tax, despite making the largest global profits in its 150-year history of £31 billion. That cannot be right while our constituents have been struggling to pay their bills.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) has tabled new clause 2, which would require the Government, as we have already heard, to produce a report about the fiscal impact of the Bill's changes to

[*Wera Hobhouse*]

the EPL and relief for investment expenditure. We cannot lose sight of the bigger picture. To avoid a repeat of the energy crisis, we must end our reliance on oil and gas. Investing in renewables would mean cheaper energy across the country. We would no longer be reliant on dictators such as Vladimir Putin who use natural gas as a weapon. As well as being more affordable, renewables are the best route to energy security. It is very disappointing to hear Conservative Members advocate for business as usual. We need to transition away from oil and gas.

Harriet Cross: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. At what point does she believe we will be fully reliant on renewables?

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. It is absolutely by putting in place the measures for transition that we will meet net zero. If we continue with business as usual and continue to listen to people who ultimately do not understand that unless we get to net zero our whole economy will suffer, then people will suffer. We will also have big, big problems with issues such as huge migration if climate change can rule unchallenged. This is why the Liberal Democrats believe the transition to net zero is important and why we need to put measures in place to make that happen. It is disappointing that the Conservatives, as the previous Government and now the Opposition, still do not understand how urgently we require climate action.

Dave Doogan: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. What is her understanding of what will happen to domestic consumption of oil and gas products in the United Kingdom if the domestic industry atrophies but domestic demand still exists? What will happen in that scenario? Where will the oil and gas come from, or will we just give it up overnight?

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The whole argument is that we will continue to rely on oil and gas for the time being, but unless we start to change something, on the current projection we will not get to net zero as urgently as we need to. Progress has been too slow, so the longer we hesitate the more difficult it will become. The new Government have understood that urgency, and the Liberal Democrats support them in dealing with this issue with more urgency than we saw from the previous Government. I therefore repeat that we support the measures, but we would like the Government to support our new clause 2. As I said, it will show what we can raise by closing the loophole. It would by extension, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans clarified, show what has been squandered by the previous Government—money that could have been invested.

Tristan Osborne: According to the New Economics Foundation, the previous Government's levy raised £10.6 billion for the oil and gas industry, but the industry invested only £3.6 billion of that in new capital projects, taking the remainder as sheer profits. Does the hon. Lady agree with me that that is exactly why it was a foolhardy proposal? The profits made did not go into investing in new capital assets, but largely went into shareholders' pockets.

Wera Hobhouse: Indeed. I could not agree more and I thank the hon. Gentleman for clarifying the figures. That is why something needed to change and something needed to give. I repeat that I hope Government Members can support our new clause 2, because it matters. It will lay open what has been squandered and what difference we could make if we close the loophole.

The Chairman of Ways and Means: I call Yuan Yang.

Yuan Yang: Thank you, Ms Ghani. I apologise for my inconsistent bobbing. I am still learning when to stand up, but what has gone up and stayed up are the record profits of the oil and gas majors. I will start my speech on that topic, and will go on to speak about where those profits have come from and, finally, what the proceeds of our EPL will go to fund.

First, on those record profits, I think all Members of the Committee agree that the record profits in the oil and gas industry in 2022 were excessive. In 2023, however, the profits for Shell, the largest oil and gas major in Europe, barely decreased from the previous year. In fact, if we take its profits from the first half of this year, Shell looks likely to eclipse even those of last year. In the first half of this year, Shell has had profits of \$14 billion. Half of that went to share buybacks, which do nothing to fund the decarbonisation that is so necessary to secure the future of energy production here in the UK and around the world. Those record profits, much of which have been handed back to shareholders, are going in the opposite direction of what ordinary families and working people need. Rather than reinvest in the transitions of the future, I would argue that the Conservative party is looking at the industries of the past and clinging on to a past that is quickly fading from reality.

Secondly, let us look at where those profits have come from. The House of Commons Library states that generally lower wholesale prices in the last year led suppliers to start offering fixed tariffs, as of summer 2023. However, they have been far more cautious in pricing those tariffs, with prices close to the level of the energy cap. Any return to competition in the market is expected to be slow. That reflects the state of affairs we face today. The wholesale prices of oil and gas—as an example, look at the price of Brent crude in the market today—are back below the levels they were pre the Russian invasion of Ukraine, yet the retail prices facing ordinary working families in the UK are still far above those levels. What happens in the middle? The profits are being taken by the oil and gas companies. Largely, they are not being reinvested in the productive sectors of the future, but being paid back to shareholders.

In any market where the return of competition is expected to be slow, there is a role for the Government to regulate the fair share of proceeds—who gets the surplus from that market. Here I pause and say that when we look across the Committee to who is arguing for the interests of working people and who is arguing for the interests of the oil and gas profit-making giants, the political divisions are clear. There are schools in my constituency that are fundraising to insulate themselves. The Maiden Erlegh school where I live is asking its parent association to provide better wooden frames for its windows, because they leak in winter. That is the public estate that our Government have been elected to fix and repair. We will set about doing so with the profits from the levies set out in the Bill we are discussing today.

Harriet Cross: I thank the hon. Member for giving way. She says it is clear who is on the side of working people versus the companies. My constituents are the people working in the oil and gas sector. They are the ones most at risk of losing their jobs if the changes brought in through the EPL go wrong. I am on the side of working people, and I am on the side of my constituents. No matter what MPs across the House say, I will always fight for my working people in Gordon and Buchan who just happen to be working people in the oil and gas sector.

Yuan Yang: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and, at this point, refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my support from the unionised voices of those who work in the sector to which she referred. I commend the Government's green prosperity plan to initiate a skills transition, and provide funding for it, so that those workers can profit from the industries of the future rather than the industries of the present and the past.

As the Minister said, the energy profits levy will raise £2.3 billion over the current Parliament, which will go towards the funding of, for instance, Great British Energy. GB Energy, whose headquarters are in Aberdeen, will bring innovation in green technologies not only to Scotland but to the whole of the UK. I will forgive, for a moment, the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) for perhaps not recognising my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton and Clyde Valley (Imogen Walker)—I know that an awful lot of new Scottish Members were elected in the last general election, and it must be difficult to learn all their faces. I ask the hon. Member to reflect on the possible reasons for the election of a record number of Scottish Labour Members while he sets about learning their names and faces.

The Government's auction of 130 wind, solar and tidal energy projects in the latest round of the contracts for difference scheme points the way to the future. It points the way to the generation of 95% of the UK's energy through green and decarbonised energy by 2030; to a transition that everyone in this Committee, and certainly everyone on the Government Benches, is looking forward to seeing in the next 10 years; and to the delivery of the local power plan, which will support local energy projects in communities such as mine. I welcome the funding of local projects such as Reading Hydro, which takes hydroelectric energy from the Thames, and the work of Reading Community Energy Society, which generates solar energy on the rooftops of the University of Reading and rooftops across my constituency. I look forward to all those projects and to the projects of the future, which is why I commend the measures that we are discussing today.

3.30 pm

Sammy Wilson: The Government have set a number of objectives that they wish to achieve over the next five years. Central to those objectives are growth, highly paid jobs, energy security, and increased investment. However, when I look at clauses 15 to 17, I ask myself, "Have the Government gone mad?" They are undermining the very objectives that they are seeking to achieve through their policy of taxation, a policy that I believe is driven more by green ideology and by prejudice against some high-earning companies than by any economic logic. The economic logic of these proposals, and indeed

the predictions made by those who have fed in the data and the information about them, indicate that, at least in our major oil and energy industry, investment will go down, production will go down, and highly paid jobs will go down.

The hon. Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) said that hers was the party that was interested in ordinary workers. As has already been pointed out, no Scottish Labour Members are taking part in the debate. I suggest that the 100,000 workers in Scotland who depend on the oil and gas industry feel abandoned today because there is no one here to defend them—although I have to say that if I were a Scottish Member I might not want to stick my head over the parapet, defend measures such as these, and then have to go back to my constituents to explain. I suspect that they will go through the Lobby and vote for those measures, but—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Hamilton and Clyde Valley (Imogen Walker) is opening her arms and saying that she is from Scotland. I look forward to hearing her speak later in the debate in defence of these measures, which will cost jobs.

We have heard that those jobs will be replaced by highly paid, skilled jobs in the renewables industry, but there is little evidence of that so far. Indeed, if we look at the sources of the materials and the providers of, for instance, wind turbines, we see that the skilled jobs are not in Britain. We are making ourselves dependent on countries such as China which have control of the earth metals and valuable metals that are required to provide the necessary equipment for the renewables industry.

Mr Snowden: The right hon. Member has touched on an important point. Meeting the Government's 2030 target and creating the green jobs to which he has referred will require two technologies that have not yet been tried and tested at scale, carbon capture and battery storage. Why would we gamble such an important 100,000-job industry in favour of technologies that have not even been tried and tested at scale?

Sammy Wilson: It is not just that they have not been tried and tested. There is also an acceptance—indeed, it is the Government's own stated position—that even with those technologies, we will be reliant on, and will need, oil and gas not until 2030 and not even until 2040, but beyond 2050. If we do not extract as much oil and gas from our own resources here in the United Kingdom, where will we get it from? We will get it from abroad, which brings us to the issue of energy security.

The places where energy is likely to be produced will not be stable countries, countries that will always be favourable towards us, or countries that are ruled by rational rulers. It will come from countries where rulers are irrational, and take political decisions about who they do or do not trade with on a whim. The idea that we will rely on fossil fuels until well beyond 2050 but not produce them ourselves—in fact, we are going to discourage companies from producing them in the United Kingdom, even though we know that we have the resources—and somehow or other we will still guarantee security of supply, and security of energy, for our constituents is just madness.

Wera Hobhouse: I have a very simple question to ask the right hon. Gentleman: does he believe that climate change is happening and that we need to get to net zero by 2050, or does he believe it is all a hoax?

Sammy Wilson: Only a fool would say that climate change is not happening. Climate change has occurred in all the time that the earth has been in existence. Of course it happens, and of course it is happening. The hon. Lady asks me a question to which I think anybody could give an easy answer. Yes, climate change is happening, but does that mean that we have identified all the sources of the change in our climate? Does it also mean that we should distort our economy, in such a way as she would suggest, to try to make changes to the world's climate, especially given that other countries are not making any changes to their economy and are not following our lead? They are simply ignoring us and doing what they believe is best for their own economies.

The second point I want to make is that we are leaving ourselves open to a situation in which companies that we need to invest in energy production will not do so. The OBR has made that quite clear, but even if it had not made its predictions, economic logic should make us understand that if we take investment allowances away from people and tax them, they will have less money to invest.

The Minister makes a great point: by putting all these measures on the statute book, he creates certainty for the industry. He does create certainty, because anybody looking at the Bill knows for certain what the future entails: they are going to be taxed until the pips squeak, so they will look for other places to go and make their investment. He argues that putting out a tax plan somehow gives assurance to companies, but sometimes it confirms their prejudice that Britain will not be a place where they have a future, or where they wish to invest.

I turn to the third impact of these measures, building on a point made by the hon. Member for Earley and Woodley. The Government's whole approach is to tax oil and gas companies, get money, and help working people by putting it into schools and so on. But the predictions are that we will not get more revenue, because if there is less production, there is less tax to be paid. If there is less tax to be paid, the Government have less revenue to invest in the things that hon. Members on both sides of the House would wish them to invest in. Where does that tax go? It will go to foreign countries, because that is where production will take place and where the oil companies will be taxed. They will get taxed where they make their profits. If they are not making any profits in the United Kingdom, they will not pay any revenue in the United Kingdom. They will take their production and tax revenue elsewhere.

There does not appear to be any economic logic to this proposal, other than that the oil companies are seen as bad so the Government have to tax them, even though they are taxed heavily already, and that the Government want to ensure that we have this transition to net zero, even though we know that we will still need the product that the oil companies produce for many decades into the future and we will be turning our back on that production in the United Kingdom.

If the Government are so sure that this cunning plan is going to work—I think Baldrick would have been embarrassed by this cunning plan, I have to say—they should not fear any examination of it. They should welcome it. In fact, maybe once the assessment is done, they will be able to point to red faces on the Opposition side of the House. If I were as certain as the Minister is that his plan was going to work, I would be saying, “Right, we’ll do the assessment and we’ll make you eat

your words.” I suspect that the reason that new clause 2 will be rejected today is that the red faces and the eating of words are going to be on the Government's side of the House. Unfortunately, the people who will suffer will be the hundreds of thousands of people facing rising fuel bills, the 100,000 workers who will face redundancies and an industry that we very much need in this country going into decline.

Dave Doogan: On a point of order, Madam Chair. The last but one speaker, the hon. Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang), called me out regarding my perfectly legitimate comment that there was not a single Scottish Labour MP in here. I chose my words carefully, taking part in this debate. I appreciate that there is a Labour Member here who, unless I am very much mistaken, is fulfilling the role of a Parliamentary Private Secretary and therefore will not be taking part in the debate. I ask your guidance, Madam Chair, on whether it is legitimate to call somebody out in a debate and not give them an opportunity to respond. I tried to intervene on the hon. Member for Earley and Woodley to correct the record, but she refused to give way. How can we correct the record to underline the fact that there is not a single Scottish Labour MP in here taking part in this debate on Scotland's energy?

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): The hon. Gentleman will be aware that that is not a matter for the Chair, and therefore I cannot provide advice as to how he can put that on the record. He will know as well as other hon. Members do that it is entirely at the discretion of the individual contributing at that time whether or not they take an intervention, but he has done good work in putting his point on the record via the mechanism of a point of order.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I would like to echo the arguments made by the hon. Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and for Bath (Wera Hobhouse). I rise to speak to whether clause 18 and schedule 3 should stand part of the Bill. I argue that both should be omitted, to remove the proposed new tax relief for carbon capture and storage installations as currently drafted. The tax regime for oil and gas is riddled with reliefs, exemptions and loopholes. The windfall tax introduced by the last Government was widely reported, but was slightly less reported was the increased tax relief that went along with it, which allowed oil and gas companies to deduct 91% of their capital investment costs from their tax bill.

We are now many years into an escalating climate crisis, and one that the oil companies have known they were causing since at least 1977. There is absolutely no excuse for public subsidies that incentivise fossil fuel companies to expand their operations. So while I welcome the increase in the rate of the energy profits levy and the reduction of the investment allowance, I want to highlight the fact that, because of other reliefs that still exist, North sea oil and gas companies will still be able to offset 84% of capital expenditure against tax in relation to their expansion of operations.

Mr Snowden: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that capital reliefs are about attracting investment that creates jobs and secures energy security for this country? If UK countries are to make such investments, we have to be

competitive in the global market. If we do not make those investments, what does he think will happen to the industry and the 100,000 jobs that go with it?

3.45 pm

Adrian Ramsay: As we heard earlier, it is vital that there is strong Government support and a dedicated plan to ensure transition to alternative job opportunities for anyone working in the oil and gas sector. Having a background in the renewable energy sector, I strongly support Government incentives and policies that will help that sector to expand, so that we create jobs and skills. My amendments would reverse the Government's tax relief on the conversion of oil and gas infrastructure to carbon capture and storage installations. There are many other reliefs in the tax regime that should be addressed, but they are out of the scope of the Bill.

Carbon capture and storage is a complex area. There are different types of technology that use different techniques. I support further research and development in relation to the hard-to-abate sector, but CCS cannot be used as a fig leaf to hide the expansion of fossil fuel operations. In reality, after years of hype, the result is very little carbon—less than 0.1% of annual emissions—being captured globally. Most of the carbon dioxide that has been successfully captured has been used to extract more oil. The UK has also been criticised for targeting most of its CCS at so-called blue hydrogen, the use of which would increase our long-term reliance on gas and generate more carbon emissions.

The proposed tax relief is too blunt an instrument to make a useful contribution to decarbonisation. The role of CCS is still relatively untested, so it is vital that we do not bake in over-reliance on that technology. Public funding for CCS should be restricted to research and development, and to projects that would clearly help to decarbonise hard-to-abate sectors. It absolutely must not be a green light for fossil fuel companies to carry on with business as usual and an expansion of operations. Will the Minister explore the idea of reviewing the measures, in the light of what I have suggested?

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): In October 2021, we Liberal Democrats were the first to call for a tax on oil and gas windfall profits, so I am glad that the Bill is finally scrapping the unfair investment allowance loophole, after years of oil and gas companies not paying their fair share under the Conservatives. I urge the House to adopt our amendment, which calls on the Government to set out exactly how much money is being raised through the scrapping of the investment allowance loophole, and how much money was gifted by the last Government to the oil and gas giants. My constituents in Yeovil deserve full transparency.

I encourage the Government to use the money raised by closing the loophole to address energy and environmental issues impacting my constituents in Yeovil, such as fuel poverty, particularly among pensioners; the need to protect homes and businesses from flooding; the need to support farmers with green investments; and helping homeowners to install clean heating.

In conclusion, we must ensure that our constituencies get a fair deal out of the Bill. If the average taxpayer is expected to pay their fair share, then so must the wealthiest individuals and companies in this country. There cannot be one rule for them and another for the rest of us.

James Murray: I thank hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I will respond to some of the points raised, and set out the Government's views on the new clauses. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies), asked for confirmation of our decision to retain the energy security investment mechanism. I hope that he will take yes for an answer, because yes, I can confirm that the ESIM will remain in effect until 31 March 2030, when the energy profits levy is due to end. It will continue to be adjusted in line with consumer prices index inflation in future financial years. I hope that sets his mind at rest on that point.

The hon. Gentleman asked about modelling the impact of the energy profits levy. I am sure that he will remember from his time in the Treasury the role that the Office for Budget Responsibility plays. He will see that in the report that it published alongside the Budget, it forecast £12.6 billion being raised from the levy over the forecast period. Of course, the OBR will provide updated forecasts next year.

The hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members kept raising the phrase “extraordinary profits” when talking about trying to understand the position that the oil and gas sector is in. That links directly to the energy security investment mechanism, because prices remain higher than the price floor that we set. The energy security investment mechanism means that if prices fall sufficiently and return to historically normal levels, the levy will be disapplied. The relationship between the levy, profits and the maintenance of the energy security investment mechanism is key to understanding the Government's approach.

The Liberal Democrats spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), asked about our choosing a 78% rate, how we set the rate for the energy profits levy, and about other attributes of the system being set up by the clauses under debate. We seek to achieve a balanced approach. We are raising the rate to 78%, extending the levy for a further year and removing the investment allowance, which we deem to be unjustifiably generous; yet we are maintaining 100% first-year allowances, the decarbonisation allowance, and the energy security investment mechanism. That strikes the right balance between ensuring that oil and gas companies continue to invest in oil and gas for years to come, and ensuring that they contribute to and support the transition to clean energy.

The hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) spoke about the need for long-term stability. I entirely agree that we need it. That is precisely what we seek to achieve by saying that the energy profits levy will come to an end in March 2030, by having a price floor in the ESIM—we have mentioned that several times—and by proceeding with our consultation on the post energy profits levy regime. That will give confidence to those thinking about investing in the oil and gas sector not just before the end of the energy profits levy, but post 2030.

The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) also mentioned long-term stability. He seems distracted right now, but I hope that will be of some reassurance to him. The hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens said that a £78 investment relief is available in Norway, whereas the figure is £46 in the UK. I want to put on record that in the UK, while the

[James Murray]

energy profits levy remains in place, the sector continues to benefit from an £84.25 relief for every £100 of investment. I hope that gives him some reassurance on the points that he raised.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for her thoughtful and informed contribution, which explained that our approach strikes the right balance. I must say, however, that I was disappointed by the contribution from the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay), because he seemed not to support our moves to ensure that tax is not a blocker to CCUS, which will play an essential role in our progress towards net zero. The UK has a chance to be a world leader in that sector; I hoped that he would support our efforts to ensure that it is.

Two new clauses were tabled, which hon. Members spoke about. They require reports to be published. I can remember tabling many such new clauses over the last few years. New clause 2, tabled by the hon. Member for St Albans, would require the Government to produce a report setting out the fiscal impact of the removal of the energy profits levy investment allowance and the change to the decarbonisation investment allowance rate. New clause 3, tabled by the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), would require the Government to produce a report on the expected impact of the levy changes in a number of areas, including on capital expenditure in the UK oil and gas industry and on the Scottish economy.

The Government oppose new clauses 2 and 3 on the basis that they are unnecessary. We have already set out the impact of our measures in a tax information and impact note, which was published at the time of the Budget. That note states that the changes made to the energy profits levy will raise an additional £2.3 billion over the scorecard, and further data on the UK oil and gas industry is regularly published on gov.uk.

I hope that I have addressed some of the points raised by hon. Members, and have reassured them that the new clauses are not necessary. I urge the House to let clauses 15 to 18 and schedule 3 stand part of the Bill, and to reject new clauses 2 and 3.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 15 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 16 to 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule 3 agreed to.

New Clause 2

REPORT ON FISCAL EFFECTS:

RELIEF FOR INVESTMENT EXPENDITURE

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within six months of the passing of this Act, lay before Parliament a report setting out the impact of the measures contained in clause 16 of this Act on tax revenue.” —(Daisy Cooper.)

This new clause would require the Government to produce a report setting out the fiscal impact of the Bill's changes to the Energy Profits Levy investment expenditure relief.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 74, Noes 350.

Division No. 60]

[3.56 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon	Lake, Ben
Aquarone, Steff	MacCleary, James
Babarinde, Josh	Maguire, Ben
Bennett, Alison	Maguire, Helen
Berry, Siân	Martin, Mike
Brewer, Alex	Mathew, Brian
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Maynard, Charlie
Cane, Charlotte	Medi, Llinos
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	van Mierlo, Freddie
Chadwick, David	Miller, Calum
Chamberlain, Wendy	Milne, John
Chowns, Ellie	Morello, Edward
Coghlan, Chris	Morgan, Helen
Collins, Victoria	Munt, Tessa
Cooper, Daisy	Olney, Sarah
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Perteghella, Manuela
Dance, Adam	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Darling, Steve	Ramsay, Adrian
Davey, rh Ed	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Davies, Ann	Roome, Ian
Dean, Bobby	Sabine, Anna
Denyer, Carla	Savage, Dr Roz
Eastwood, Sorcha	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Farron, Tim	Slade, Vikki
Foord, Richard	Smart, Lisa
Forster, Mr Will	Sollom, Ian
George, Andrew	Stone, Jamie
Gibson, Sarah	Swann, Robin
Glover, Olly	Taylor, Luke
Goldman, Marie	Thomas, Cameron
Gordon, Tom	Voaden, Caroline
Green, Sarah	Wilkinson, Max
Harding, Monica	Wilson, Munira
Heylings, Pippa	Wrigley, Martin
Hobhouse, Wera	Young, Claire
Jardine, Christine	
Jarvis, Liz	
Jones, Clive	
Kohler, Mr Paul	

Tellers for the Ayes:

Mr Tom Morrison and
Zöe Franklin

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Atkinson, Catherine
Abbott, Jack	Atkinson, Lewis
Abrahams, Debbie	Bailey, Mr Calvin
Adam, Shockat	Bailey, Olivia
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Baker, Richard
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Ballinger, Alex
Aldridge, Dan	Bance, Antonia
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Barker, Paula
Alexander, rh Heidi	Barron, Lee
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Ali, Rushanara	Baxter, Johanna
Ali, Tahir	Beales, Danny
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Beavers, Lorraine
Allister, Jim	Bell, Torsten
Amesbury, Mike (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Benn, rh Hilary
Anderson, Callum	Betts, Mr Clive
Anderson, Fleur	Billington, Ms Polly
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Bishop, Matt
Arthur, Dr Scott	Blake, Olivia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Asato, Jess	Blake, Rachel
Asser, James	Bloore, Chris
Athwal, Jas	Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
	Bonavia, Kevin

Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca

MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 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
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Seward, Mr Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris

Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia

Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Christian Wakeford and
Anna Turley

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 3

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must, within three months of this Act coming into force, publish a review of the expected impact of the measures in sections 15 to 18 on—

- (a) employment in the UK oil and gas industry;
- (b) capital expenditure in the UK oil and gas industry;
- (c) UK oil and gas production;
- (d) UK oil and gas demand; and
- (e) the Scottish economy and economic growth in Scotland.”—(*Gareth Davies.*)

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The Committee divided: Ayes 184, Noes 359.

Division No. 61]

[4.11 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartledge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Cleverly, rh Mr James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John

Costa, Alberto
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby
 Dewhirst, Charlie
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Flynn, rh Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison

Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan

Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wishart, Pete
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr Richard Holden and
Rebecca Paul

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi

Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess

Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 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
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul

Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan

Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 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
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, James

Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Sowards, Mr Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick

Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz

Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Christian Wakeford and
Anna Turley

Question accordingly negated.

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair (Programme Order, 27 November).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Progress reported; Committee to sit again tomorrow.

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 2023 (Addition of Relevant Enactments) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 31 October, be approved.—(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to

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

BUILDING SOCIETIES

That the draft Building Societies Act 1986 (Modifications) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 14 October, be approved.—(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

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

CAPITAL GAINS TAX

That the draft Double Taxation Relief and International Tax Enforcement (Ecuador) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 11 November, be approved.—(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

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

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Home Detention Curfew and Requisite and Minimum Custodial Periods (Amendment) Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 13 November, be approved.—(*Gerald Jones.*)

The House divided: Ayes 424, Noes 106.

Division No. 62]

[4.27 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Adam, Shockat
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Aquarone, Steff
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Babarinde, Josh
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brewer, Alex
Brickell, Phil
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia

Burgen, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Cane, Charlotte
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coghlan, Chris
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Collins, Victoria
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Daisy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Darlington, Emily
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Bobby
Dean, Josh
Denyer, Carla
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil

Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Farron, Tim
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Franklin, Zöe
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 German, Gill
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harding, Monica
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jermy, Terry

Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Clive
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lowell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 MacCleary, James
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Martin, Amanda
 Martin, Mike
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayer, Alex
 Maynard, Charlie
 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
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty (*Proxy vote
 cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Minns, Ms Julie

Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Mullane, Margaret
 Munt, Tessa
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan
 Olney, Sarah
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 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
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim

Roome, Ian
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sabine, Anna
 Sackman, Sarah
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Scroggham, Michelle
 Seward, Mr Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Sollom, Ian
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Jamie
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, Luke
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Cameron
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turnaire, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Voaden, Caroline
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Whittome, Nadia

Wilkinson, Max
Williams, David
Wilson, Munira
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Wrigley, Martin
Yang, Yuan

Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Young, Claire
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Christian Wakeford and
Anna Turley

NOES

Allister, Jim
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cleverly, rh Mr James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Grant, Helen
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca

Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenrick, rh Robert
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast
by Joy Morrissey*)
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Mak, Alan
Mayhew, Jerome
McVey, rh Esther
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Pritchard, rh Mark
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew

Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom

Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Richard Holden and
Rebecca Paul

Question accordingly agreed to.

PETITION

Pimping websites and paying for sex

4.40 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I rise on Human Rights Day, the final day of the UN's 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, to present a petition on behalf of my constituents on commercial sexual exploitation. Demand from men who pay for sex is fuelling and funding a brutal sex trafficking trade, yet our laws allow them to exploit women with impunity. To stop the exploitation, we have to stop the demand. 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."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Monmouthshire,

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.]

[P003028]

International Human Rights Day

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gerald Jones.)

4.42 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I am delighted to have secured this Adjournment debate to mark international Human Rights Day, which we remember annually across the world on 10 December.

I first declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary human rights group, whose purpose is “to raise the profile of international human rights issues within Parliament and to investigate and publicise human rights abuses occurring”.

The group is one of Parliament’s most long-standing APPGs, set up in 1976 by the late human rights champion Lord Avebury, and one of its most active, with at least one event a month and often many more. I also declare an interest in what I am about to say, as I am chair of the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Last week, the all-party parliamentary human rights group held a reception organised jointly with Amnesty International UK to mark Human Rights Day. It was very well attended, showing that the protection of human rights across the world is an issue that transcends party politics and matters greatly to many of my parliamentary colleagues right across the political spectrum.

International Human Rights Day commemorates the adoption of the universal declaration of human rights by the United Nations General Assembly on this day in 1948.

The universal declaration, whose 75th anniversary the human rights APPG celebrated last year in Parliament, is founded on the principle that

“All human beings are born free and equal”.

It has set the standards by which states must treat their citizens and provides the basis on which Governments can be called out and held to account for not doing so. The universal declaration has had a profound impact since, having inspired and paved the way for the adoption of more than 60 human rights treaties at global and regional levels and having provided the basis for the 2030 UN sustainable development goals. At the individual and collective level, the declaration has protected millions and empowered many to stand up against abuse and tyranny, and for equality and justice.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First of all, I commend the hon. Gentleman. In all my time in this House—he has been here longer than I have—I have always been impressed by his commitment to human rights issues. In every debate, he and I have been there together. I commend him for that, and put it on the record in *Hansard*. Does he agree that today we should not simply reflect on how far we have to go, but celebrate how far we have come? We should never grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap as we diligently sow. Those lovely words from the Holy Bible, which the hon. Gentleman and I both respect, must encourage us all to keep pressing, and keep winning the small human rights victories that literally save lives, grant education and preserve innocence for children.

Fabian Hamilton: I thank my friend, first for his generosity and secondly because he is an extraordinary performer in this House, not just on these green Benches but in Westminster Hall. I have sat around the table

with him in many, many debates, and he always stands up for humanity and faith. I respect and thank him for that, and I agree with his quote from the Holy Bible. I thank him for quoting it.

In this year’s commemoration, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is focusing on the realisation of rights as a pathway to solutions to many real-world challenges, such as armed conflict, political and social exclusion, and economic inequality—and, goodness me, do we not need that in the world right now?

Let me highlight a key provision of the declaration, the right to life, which is of course fundamental to the enjoyment of every other right that we are here to protect. Categorical violations of the right to life include: extra-judicial killing; the misuse of the death penalty, or, I would argue, the use of it at all; life-threatening prison conditions, which we have seen in the footage from Syria in recent hours and days; the use of live ammunition by police forces against unarmed protestors; serious violations of humanitarian law; and environmental degradation and climate change, which give rise to serious threats to the existence of present and future generations. Tragically, the right to life is violated in many countries, by state and non-state actors, including China, North Korea, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, Colombia and Mexico to name just a few, I am sorry to say.

I would like to express the APPG’s deep concern about the killing of human rights defenders, brave people from all walks of life: community leaders, environmental activists, lawyers, journalists, trade unionists, academics and members of non-governmental organisations who are committed to promoting and protecting the human rights of their communities, in their country and the wider world. The APPG has been privileged to meet many inspiring human rights defenders over the years. Their work documenting violations, holding human rights violators to account and tackling cycles of impunity may result in serious threats, including harassment, smear campaigns, physical attacks, arbitrary detention, torture, and in the worst cases, murder.

Environmental and land rights defenders are at particular risk. The non-governmental organisation Global Witness estimates that in 2023, 196 land and environmental defenders were killed around the world. The highest number by far were in Colombia, followed by Brazil, Mexico, Honduras and Nicaragua. During my time as shadow Minister for Latin America, I visited Colombia and met trade unionists and human rights defenders who faced violent attacks every single day. Two weeks ago, I met representatives of the Wiwa indigenous people of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia to hear their testimony at first hand, here in our Parliament.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the hon. Gentleman—my hon. Friend—for securing this debate on such an important day. He is right to draw particular attention to the experiences of defenders of indigenous communities and environmental rights defenders in Colombia and elsewhere. Back in October, in my capacity as a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary human rights group, I hosted a roundtable here in Parliament with speakers from the Colombia Caravana.

[Ellie Chowns]

It brought together lawyers from 24 countries who had recently conducted a fact-finding trip in Colombia. They highlighted the increasing power of illegal armed groups, particularly in areas with no or limited state presence, and the serious threat that those groups posed to human rights defenders. We heard powerful testimony from the leader of an indigenous people's reserve, who spoke of the threats to which his community was subject and called for the UK Government to do everything possible to ensure that UK companies were held to account for the impact of their actions. Would the hon. Gentleman support his call?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, for her work as an officer of the APPG, and for chairing that meeting. I was slightly late for it, but I was there for most of it, and I heard those testimonies. Of course I would support that call. I think it important for us to recognise the extraordinarily brave and courageous work of people like those who were there on that day, such as the human rights defenders from Peru from whom we heard very recently, and the representatives of the Wiwa people of Colombia, whom I mentioned. All over the world, human rights defenders are putting their lives, their safety and their freedom at risk to defend their lands and their rights against rapacious companies that are exploiting them because no one will protect them except themselves. I thank the hon. Lady for her support, and for all the work that she is doing. With President Gustavo Petro, we have renewed hope in Colombia, but sadly the attacks continue. Given that the UK is the penholder for Colombia at the United Nations, I should be grateful if the Minister reaffirmed our commitment to what the Colombians call paz total, or total peace.

As I have said, indigenous peoples continue to be disproportionately targeted, accounting for 49% of total murders. The UK and like-minded countries must help to support and protect human rights defenders. I understand that, to this end, the "UK Support for Human Rights Defenders" guidance, published in 2019, is being reviewed, and I should be interested to know whether the Minister has an update on when we can expect that review to be published. Given the crucial role that human rights defenders play in fostering peace, justice and inclusive development, I ask the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to consider elevating the guidance to a more comprehensive strategy, with benchmarks for officials and posts, which could then be adapted to specific country situations.

I cannot speak about the importance of the universal declaration without highlighting another of its central provisions: equality. Article 2 states:

"Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

I believe that all parliamentarians are horrified by the treatment of women and girls in some parts of the world, particularly Afghanistan.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on an excellent speech, and on securing a debate on such an important

day. He rightly mentions Afghanistan and the issues around the discrimination of women and girls in that great country. Should the UK consider joining the 30, I think, countries that are involved in an action at the International Court of Justice, because of their concerns about breaches of the UN convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women?

Fabian Hamilton: Yes, and I would be interested to hear from our Minister whether we should join that action, because in some way or another, we really need to draw the world's attention more clearly, and in a more focused way, to the shocking, appalling and totally unjustifiable treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan—and, indeed, other parts of the world. Until the sexes in this world are equal, we will not have the peace, justice and development that all humanity deserves.

Under this Government, we rightly have a relentless focus on tackling violence against women and girls in our country, but that focus should extend across the world, as I have said. It is simply incomprehensible—I stress this again—that in the 21st century, the Taliban can completely silence Afghan women and girls, almost erasing their very existence and barring them from education and public life. Extremely courageous women who protest against these violations face the most terrifying consequences, including enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture.

Just today, I heard an example of how this works on the ground in Afghanistan. I was told by somebody who knows the country well, and who is not an Afghan, that he recently spoke to Afghan doctors and midwives about the problems that many Afghan women experience when giving birth, especially in remote rural areas. Birth complications can lead to all sorts of other horrors, including the death of babies at birth. Under a special exception, the Taliban have allowed women to work as doctors and midwives, thank goodness, but a problem arises if a female midwife or doctor is stopped by, as he put it, a "bearded man" while she walks to work from where she lives. She will be stopped and questioned, and sometimes returned home. As women and girls can no longer get the training or education necessary to become gynaecologists, obstetricians, specialists, doctors, clinicians or midwives, there is a time-bomb ticking in this field of work, among others, in Afghanistan. It is extremely disturbing.

Our APPG is worried about democratic back-sliding globally, and the consequent erosion of political and civil rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly and association. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index, less than 8% of the world's population lived in a full, proper democracy in 2023. Almost 40% lived under authoritarian rule—a share that has been creeping up in recent years. I do not need to remind hon. Members that this is happening, because we are all aware of it. Every single day, we hear stories of Parliaments and parliamentary democracy under attack.

Electoral autocracies are becoming more prevalent; sham elections are held, in a largely unsuccessful attempt to provide a veneer of political legitimacy. I will not name countries, but we all know who they are. The increase in violent conflict, as seen in Russia and the middle east, has stifled progress towards more meaningful

political participation. It would be helpful to know more about how our Government will continue to promote and support democracy across the world and, closer to home, whether the defending democracy taskforce still has a role to play in protecting the UK's democratic integrity from threats of foreign interference.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I really appreciate the hon. Member bringing this matter to the House today. It is incumbent on all of us to ensure that we do everything we can to stand up for human rights, whether at home or abroad. The need to stand up for democracy, not only in the world in which we live physically but online, is also a real concern for me and many across the House. Does he agree that we need to do everything we can to ensure that elections, not just here but across the world, and the tenets of democracy are protected as we struggle to deal with those who would love to erode the fundamental freedoms and human rights that we hold dear?

Fabian Hamilton: I thank the hon. Member for making such an important intervention. I would certainly agree that online interference is something we should be deeply concerned about. Indeed, we are deeply concerned about it. We have seen examples of that interference, that hacking and those bots, as they call them, creating posts for non-existent individuals on our social media, urging people to do something or to vote in a particular way, and quoting sham facts and figures that are made up or invented to persuade people to make a decision that would be against their interests or inclinations.

In connection with the latter, I note a growing worry about transnational repression when authoritarian Governments reach across their borders to silence dissent among diaspora communities and exiles, including through illegal deportation, abduction, digital threats, attacks and family intimidation. Indeed, we have heard examples in recent years of BBC World Service correspondents in London having their families intimidated, harassed or even arrested by the authorities in Iran. Those people have nothing whatever to do with the work that their family members are doing here in London, but they are none the less paying the price for that freedom to broadcast, that freedom of information and the brilliant work that the BBC World Service does.

The UK has not been immune to this, as I have just said, and I am pleased that our Government have recognised that. Individuals living here who have left Russia, Hong Kong, China or Iran have been subject to surveillance, attacks, confiscation of their properties and bank accounts in their countries of origin, and even assassination and attempted assassination.

UK parliamentarians have been targeted as well, with foreign Governments imposing sanctions against them for calling out human rights violations. This will need to be more effectively addressed. I am sure I am not alone in the House in finding out that all my assets and bank accounts in Russia, of which I have none whatsoever, have been confiscated or closed down. In recent years, members of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the last Parliament were refused visas to go to China because of what the Committee had said about Hong Kong and Taiwan. This is simply unacceptable, and we need to address it.

As I said earlier, I am the current chair of the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and I would like to commend the human rights work of the IPU, particularly that of its committee on the human rights of parliamentarians—not the one I chair, but the international one—which is doing a lot of work to defend the rights of parliamentarians. The committee seeks to defend them when they are under attack. Every year, MPs around the world face abuse, mistreatment, disappearance and sometimes death. The human rights APPG and the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union work hand in hand in the belief that parliamentarians' voices must be protected and allowed to be heard, free from the fear of violence or harassment. Parliamentarians are often the so-called canaries in the coal mine. If the human rights of parliamentarians are being violated, the situation of those in that country who do not have wider popular backing or the high profile of a local MP is likely to be far, far worse.

I therefore urge my hon. Friend the Minister to make it clear that this Government will put human rights and peace building at the forefront of our foreign policy once again. That includes a relentless focus on securing the release of arbitrarily detained nationals such as Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori. Anoosheh spoke extremely powerfully and beautifully at last week's event about his imprisonment in Iran, and I am pleased to call him a friend. He is a delightful man and I am amazed that, after the ordeal he went through, he is still able to campaign in the open and democratic way that he has. He really is a remarkable man. I would like to gain more support for victims of gender-based violence in conflict and modern-day slavery, and to encourage support for the International Criminal Court and the importance of international law.

More specifically, parliamentarians have a key role to play in ensuring Governments' compliance with human rights obligations, and holding those Governments to account for any violations; in incorporating human rights protections in national legislation; in helping to generate the necessary political will to bring about positive change domestically and internationally; and in engaging with, supporting and validating civil society, human rights defenders and inter-governmental and grassroots human rights organisations. I pay tribute to all Members of the House and the other place for their work on these issues, whether on Select Committees, with all-party parliamentary groups or in their individual engagement with human rights organisations and defenders.

I also pay tribute to my dear friend, Tony Lloyd, who died earlier this year, from whom I took over the responsibility of chairing the APPG on human rights. He was a spokesperson from his first election in 1983, through his time as Minister of State at the Foreign Office in Tony Blair's Government of 1997, for human rights and for the prominence and importance of human rights worldwide. Not long before he died, he spoke to a friend of mine and said, "In the event of my death, I would like Fabian Hamilton to take over the role." I found that deeply moving, so I undertake the role not just in the name of all those who are oppressed, whose human rights are not easy or clear, or whose human rights are taken away from them, but in the name of Tony Lloyd, to carry on the work he did.

Governments, of course, have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring their citizens benefit from their rights, and for promoting respect for human rights internationally.

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

I know this Government take that responsibility seriously. Having worked closely with the Foreign Secretary and his excellent team for several years, I can say with the utmost certainty that this Government are committed to protecting the rule of law and the international rules-based order on which our security and prosperity rest.

I therefore welcome the Government's unflinching approach to calling out serious and systematic human rights violations committed by state and non-state actors and, when appropriate, the imposition of sanctions. I believe it would be beneficial for the Government to consider bringing in legislation on mandatory human rights and environmental corporate due diligence.

Finally, the debate could not come at a more appropriate time. Democracy and freedoms hang by a thread across the world: in Putin's Russia, there are forced conscriptions for the illegal war in Ukraine; the Iranian regime is clamping down on legitimate protests with the most brutal force; and China continues to lurch towards interference in our democracy, has all but destroyed any semblance of it in Hong Kong, and wishes to attack the democracy that is now evident in Taiwan. Members of the all-party parliamentary group on human rights and I hope to continue engaging on these issues with the FCDO, and I am looking forward to the Minister's response on this 76th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs.

5.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): May I say how appropriate it is for you to be chairing the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, as you have been such a champion for women since you came into the House, and when you were Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee? The theme of women and equalities has been raised again and again by Members during the debate.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) for securing the debate, and for the fact he has secured it on Human Rights Day. We have just had a lovely occasion with Mr Speaker, where we celebrated the work of Parliamentarians for Peace, co-ordinated by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). I will attempt to answer the question she raised in her intervention later in my remarks.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East for his tireless work to promote the importance of international human rights, including as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on human rights. I congratulate him on his recent election as chair of the British group at the Inter-Parliamentary Union, standing up for democracy, free from fear of violence, for every country. The magic of the IPU is that it brings together members from so many different countries, with their different versions of democracy, all straining towards that common goal.

I was struck by what the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) said about the importance of online safety and democracy. Having taken her seat in this House, I am sure she is aware now of the erosion of our rights as Members, brought here on the wind of democracy, being attacked online, and how disgraceful that is. We must seek new and fresh ways of tackling online abuse.

I also appreciate the contributions of other hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns), who talked about the issues in Colombia, the indigenous groups and the illegal armed groups. Human rights defenders have put their lives at risk to defend their land and traditions, as other hon. Members who share her interest, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East, and have gone to Colombia and got to know the concerns there, have made us aware. The UK Government's important work in Colombia on human rights—which goes back to before the peace process and includes supporting the country as it brought that process in and monitoring it, with its new Government—started in this House and continues to have its support.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East also mentioned those who have gone before us, such as Lord Avebury and the former Member for Rochdale. I may not have known him as well as my hon. Friend, but he did a fantastic job of supporting the women of Belarus who did not start out as politicians or human rights defenders but whose husbands were locked up in the summer of 2022 and who ended up becoming public figures in their own right. Once again, they were attacked online and attacked for all they have done to stand up for their country.

As hon. Members are aware, today marks Human Rights Day, commemorating the adoption of the universal declaration of human rights in 1948. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East is aware of and was invited to the celebration in the Foreign Office this afternoon to mark Human Rights Day. We would all have liked to be there but we are doing this debate instead, so we are celebrating it in our own way. The team, who I must commend for their excellence, have put on an important event to listen to those who work in non-governmental organisations, human rights defenders and others who care passionately about human rights. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, celebrated how far we have come. Today is a celebration of that and the UK's important role, but it is also a reminder that we must keep pushing forward where human rights have not yet been achieved.

As the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth spoke about women in Afghanistan, we continue to call for the human rights of all Afghans to be protected, including those of women and girls and religious and ethnic minorities. Officials at the Doha-based UK mission to Afghanistan regularly press the Taliban on human rights. We are still making very limited progress, so we must continue to speak out in this House. That way, if there is any online coverage in Afghanistan today for Human Rights Day, those women will know that we are talking about them, their education, their wanting to become midwives and nurses, which is being blocked by the Taliban, to be teachers, to work, or to have small businesses. Instead, we are seeing a

terrible deterioration of women's rights. I know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that that is a concern that you hold dear.

As the Prime Minister said in his speech to the UN General Assembly this year, the declaration sets out

"The very essence of what it is to be human—of equal and inalienable rights based on a foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

As one of its original drafters, the UK must continue championing its importance and building upon its foundation, given the challenges that we face today. The Government will act to protect and promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law around the world.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister's powerful speech highlights the responsibility that we all have to protect human rights in the UK and around the world. Earlier today, I was with Councillor Amjid Wazir from Stoke-on-Trent and a group of Kashmiris who were presenting a petition to Downing Street to highlight the ongoing human rights abuses in Kashmir, the lack of self-determination, and the continuing violations following the suspension of article 370 of the Indian constitution, which guarantees the political autonomy of Kashmir and Jammu. All too often, Kashmir seems to be forgotten about; it is not talked about in this place nearly enough. May I ask what the Government's current view is on the ongoing issues in Jammu and Kashmir? Can she take back to her Department our wish to discuss this matter fully in this House, because it has been a while since those people were given a voice here and I think that they would welcome it?

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for his important point and for the work that he is doing to represent his constituents, such as, for example, going to Downing Street with a petition. Interestingly, the other Member who is very strong on Kashmir is my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East who, like other Members here, regularly brings groups of constituents to the House. I know that the cross-party work that is done to promote human rights and to ensure that we observe their importance in Kashmir is crucial. That situation is monitored by the FCDO, and I would be very happy to write to him in more detail about the exact way in which that is done, bearing in mind, of course, that India and Pakistan play a crucial role in maintaining the peace.

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and for her kind words earlier. We know that human rights defenders have been detained without trial in many places—Khurram Parvez is just one example. The same is true of politicians and political activists, such as Yasin Malik, whose condition we are very concerned about. It would not be appropriate if, today of all days, we fail to mention the situation in the middle east, particularly given what is going on in Syria, Israel, Palestine and Lebanon. I hope the Minister will be able to respond to those points in her closing remarks.

Catherine West: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning Yasin Malik, whose situation the FCDO is actively monitoring. I know that she is aware of that, because she is a regular correspondent with the Foreign Office and a very active member of the all-party group on human rights.

On Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, we are, of course, monitoring the humanitarian response there. On Syria, we all knew how terrible the situation was, but to see the unspeakable conditions in those prisons, to see the newspaper pictures of those nooses covered in human blood, and to understand that people, including women and children, have been buried six feet under in cells has been truly devastating. We do not know what the future holds for Syria, but it is a very fragile situation. What we do know is that this House, on Human Rights Day, has emphasised the importance of human rights being at the heart of the middle east on several different fronts. As these different situations develop, human rights must play a key role in any peace process and in how Syria is governed in the future.

I will shorten my speech a little, Madam Deputy Speaker, as I know that people are keen to get on to human rights and IPU events this evening. We want to maximise the impact of all the tools at our disposal, and our approach sees the agenda in five themes, which I will quickly outline. The first is on defending civic space and fundamental freedoms. Today, a third of the world's population live in countries with a closed civic space, which is clearly unacceptable. We will defend those spaces by changing our fundamental relationship to enable grassroots actors in partner countries to advocate for people's rights. We will protect media freedom, building on the call from Commonwealth leaders last month to implement the Commonwealth media principles across our diverse family of nations, to which I refer the hon. Member for Lagan Valley.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East set out so clearly, the Government must continue to promote and support democracy in this world, and we are doing so through the Defending Democracy Taskforce. The taskforce is an enduring function of Government, which seeks to secure the democratic integrity of the UK from the full range of threats, including foreign interference. It comprises Ministers, operational leaders and senior officials, and it brings together His Majesty's Government's work on defending democracy to ensure we have a whole-of-Government response to the threats we face. The taskforce is reviewing the UK's response to transnational repression, which was eloquently laid out by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East. With his permission, I will write to him and all members of his APPG once the review is finished to give him a sense of where we are going on this important work, and so it can marry up with his earlier request that we look in an organised and systematic way at how we organise our work on human rights not just across the Foreign Office, but across Government. We must have a robust and joined-up approach across Government and law enforcement, not only on the human rights agenda, but specifically on transnational repression.

My hon. Friend was right to highlight his concerns about the killing of human rights defenders. They do inspiring work, often putting themselves in harm's way. We heard from the hon. Member for North Herefordshire about human rights defenders and peacebuilders who put their lives at risk to speak out. I confirm that our human rights defender guidance is being reviewed, and we expect it to be finalised and published in the new year. We will certainly take account of the wise recommendations from the debate about what a review should cover and of the examples used. Meanwhile, we

[Catherine West]

continue to work with partners to address the shocking level of reprisals against human rights defenders, including women.

Our second theme focuses on upholding the rule of law. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East mentioned critical right-to-life violations, such as the misuse of the death penalty and the use of excessive force against unarmed protesters. We need to promote and demonstrate respect for the rule of law in addressing those and many other issues. We have levers within the multilateral system to promote and defend human rights, including at the United Nations and through regional bodies, such as the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. My hon. Friend made particular mention of attacks against human rights defenders in Colombia, which I covered earlier.

I am delighted that we have a renewed parliamentary delegation to the Council of Europe, including a number of hon. Members of this House, and I look forward to them reporting back and bringing such matters to the House's attention. I am glad to share that we are seeking election for another term on the Human Rights Council from 2026 to 2028, where the UK leads negotiations on resolutions that put in place accountability mechanisms for priority countries around the world, including Syria and Sudan.

As I said, in Syria, Assad with support from Russia and Iran has committed brutal atrocities. Our focus now is on working with the Syrian people and the international community to move quickly towards an inclusive political transition. We are committed to tackling impunity and supporting an effective and independent International Criminal Court as the primary international institution for investigating and prosecuting the most serious crimes of international concern.

Promoting compliance with international humanitarian law is the cornerstone of UK policy, and we call on all parties to conflicts to implement their obligations, reducing impacts on civilians and other non-combatants. This autumn, we published an updated voluntary report on our domestic implementation of international humanitarian law, and we are supporting other states to do the same. As ministerial colleagues have said in the House, we are clear about the unacceptable humanitarian situation in Gaza—a matter that many in this House have championed. We will continue to use all the diplomatic tools at our disposal to work with international partners to bring about a ceasefire and secure the release of hostages.

Accountability is not just about international processes, and that is why we work in partnership with the USA and the EU to ensure that Ukraine can fully and fairly investigate allegations of war crimes in its own judicial system. We have our best legal minds working on that. In other places, such as Nigeria, we are advising on dealing with vulnerable witnesses, including children and survivors of sexual violence. Our legal diplomacy is second to none.

The third of our five themes focuses on championing equal rights for all. I have already spoken about the Taliban's disgraceful exclusion of women from all aspects of public life. We want to address the stalled progress and roll-back on the rights of women, girls, LGBT+

people, and those belonging to other marginalised groups globally. That is why we will continue to champion the rights and freedoms of women and girls, including in sexual and reproductive health and rights, and to support women's rights organisations and challenge harmful disinformation. We will support the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, working with female parliamentarians globally to address barriers to their political empowerment.

We have announced a groundbreaking global programme to prevent technology-facilitated gender-based harassment and abuse, backed by over £27 million of funding. I hope that the hon. Member for Lagan Valley will be pleased about that development. That programme will pilot innovative work with partner countries to promote a safer online experience, counter extreme misogyny spread online, and support victims and survivors of online harassment and abuse.

Finally, we will defend the rights of people belonging to marginalised communities—for instance, by funding the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum to advocate for disability rights. By championing freedom of religion or belief for all—if the hon. Member for Strangford were in his place, he would be pleased to hear me say this—we are fighting back against the threats that so many people face for simply what they do or do not believe in.

The fourth theme focuses on supporting accountable, effective and inclusive institutions. Sadly, we are seeing a drop in the quality of institutional life internationally. We want to work with partners to protect democratic processes and strengthen Government legitimacy. In Moldova, for example, we have helped President Sandu's Government to counter Russian disinformation through the UK's Government Communication Service International. In Brazil, we are sharing UK expertise, as the Government there develop their own online safety Bill. In Nigeria, we are supporting Kaduna state to improve budget transparency. We are continuing long-term work with Nepal, supporting the transition from conflict to democracy.

The final theme focuses on responding to shared global challenges by prioritising human rights and governance principles. This debate further challenges the Department to get that right. We are living in a rapidly changing world that demands that we adapt, but we must do that while maintaining our principles. We are taking multiple steps to do that effectively. We are conducting a national assessment of our approach to tackling business-related human rights abuses, including in global supply, and ensuring that our actions are firmly based on the evidence of what does and does not work. We are actively engaging at the Council of Europe to address the impact of climate and nature emergencies on human rights. We are hosting the second democracy action partnership with Indonesia in Jakarta to support democratic resilience in the region. We are working with partners, such as the UK-based Centre for Information Resilience, to remotely verify and document digital content relating to the horrific violence in Sudan.

Those five themes lay a strong foundation for defending and promoting human rights around the world. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East will agree—based on what I have said, and indeed on the FCDO's earlier event to mark Human Rights Day,

which sadly we both missed—that the Government do indeed see human rights and peace building at the heart of our work. We recognise that many Members share that commitment, and I thank them for attending today. Ultimately, a freer, safer and more just world is in

everyone's interests, and this Government will work flat out with our partners to achieve that goal.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 10 December 2024

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

Rare Autoimmune Rheumatic Diseases

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I have done so many times, and it is always a pleasure to be here and to see you fully in control. It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in his place. I was hoping that it would be this Minister, so when he walked through the door, I was especially pleased to see him in person. By the way, I would have been pleased to see any Minister—I do not want to offend anybody. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), is in his place as well. He and I talked last night about this issue.

This debate is, by its very nature, a niche debate. Dr Huq, if you have a constituent who has an autoimmune rheumatic disease or you know somebody with one, you will be here to represent them, but not everybody has, because only a small number of people across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have one of these diseases. However, I look forward very much to having the debate.

I was chatting beforehand to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), and she was telling me—she will refer to this herself when the time comes—of the important case of her constituent, a good friend. I will leave it to the hon. Lady to put forward that case.

I have always had a deep interest in any health issues. I am my party's health spokesperson, and if there are any health debates anywhere, in Westminster Hall or in the main Chamber, I make it my business to attend those debates and to contribute to them, whether by speeches or questions. That is really important. I have a particular interest in rare diseases, and that came through a constituent who lives down the Ards peninsula. I have probably known him all his life. When you get to my age, Dr Huq, there are many people you have known all their lives; that is just a fact. The point is that he married a young girl from the area. She had a rare disease, and my interest came through contact between her and the family and me across the Ards peninsula. Across Strangford, this became a massive issue, and that lady and that family today fly the flag for rare diseases in the Ards peninsula and in Strangford.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. I think we start from the NHS point of view. I am an advocate for the NHS—always have been and always will be—as we all are in this House. I am one who believes in the foundation of our NHS and the people who hold it together—the people whom we may not meet, but who are the glue and the gel that keeps it going and keeps it together. I am aware of the stress and

strain on the NHS, and give my full support as the Government attempt to make the changes that are necessary for the NHS to survive. I very much welcome the Government's commitment. I think they have committed £26.3 billion to the NHS, and that is a massive contribution. It shows confidence on the part of the Government; we welcome that. My starting position is praise for the people behind those three little letters, N-H-S.

We are beginning to look at NHS restructuring—the Secretary of State has confirmed that, and the Ministers are all committed to it. There are lots of priorities that the Government have to get to, but amongst that is the restructuring. A vital component is that the NHS provides high-quality, equitable care for all people, regardless of how rare or complex their condition is. If you—when I say “you”, Dr Huq, I really mean me or anyone else across the United Kingdom—do not have a rare disease, you may not understand what it means to have one, and how rare or complex a particular condition is, but that tells me that we need to be aware of this issue. We need to reach out and we need to help. The Government have a commitment to rare diseases as well. Although they may not be mathematically or statistically numerous, they represent individuals, families—relatives—and friends, who all understand the issue very well.

I have been interested in rare diseases since I was in the Northern Ireland Assembly, before I came here. We had contact with ladies down the Ards peninsula who were very much aware of rare diseases and the issues, so we started a rare diseases group in the Assembly, which we have continued here over the years. I will use this opportunity to speak on their behalf about some complex, rare diseases—rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that because so few people are impacted by rare diseases, raising awareness among health professionals is a key aspect of helping those people, who may often feel overlooked simply because of the very small number who come into the ambit of the subject matter we are discussing?

Jim Shannon: As my hon. Friend often does in these debates, he brings forward a reminder of why this debate is important and why we need to raise awareness. It is about giving confidence to people out there who may have these diseases and may think that they are fighting this battle all on their own, but are not. We need to raise awareness among NHS staff. It is impossible to know about every rare disease, but it is good to recognise the symptoms and to be able to point people in the right direction.

Rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases are a range of chronic, currently incurable conditions in which the body's immune system damages its own tissues, often in multiple organs throughout the body simultaneously. That is a lot of words but, to use a phrase that we would say back home, it means that they come at a person from all sides. They can lead to tissue or organ damage that, in some cases, can be fatal. We cannot ignore the fact that that can be fatal and the importance of responding in a positive fashion.

At present, the outcomes are not good enough for people living with rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases: they wait too long for a diagnosis, have variable access

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to specialist care and cannot always access help and support when they need it. In any debate that we have about ill health, we often say that early diagnosis is important, but so is having access to specialist care. It is important that NHS workers are able to notice something that may be unusual and not something that they see every day. It is also important that the care, help and support that people need is available when they need it. Preliminary data from the Rare Autoimmune Rheumatic Disease Alliance's soon-to-be-released 2024 patient survey found that the average time to diagnose from symptom onset was two and a half years—it is that long before anything happens. In those two and a half years, people suffer, worry themselves sick and wonder, “Am I going to get out the other side?” The data shows that 30% of patients waited five years for a diagnosis from symptom onset.

Rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases impact on around 170,000 people in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Hon. Members may not recognise some of the diseases, but they include Behçet's disease, lupus, myositis, scleroderma, Sjögren's syndrome and vasculitis. They can affect many parts of the body—the joints, the skin, the lungs, the kidneys or the heart—and often require cross-medical expertise. That is just a small number of the things that come the way of 170,000 people across the United Kingdom. Unlike the vast majority of rare diseases, the conditions occur predominantly in adult life and are predominantly non-genetic. That means that people do not need to have a history of them: they can come out of the blue.

The Rare Autoimmune Rheumatic Disease Alliance, a group made up of clinicians and charities, such as Lupus UK, Vasculitis UK, Scleroderma & Raynaud's UK and Sjögren's UK, has set out a number of key solutions to improve care for RAIRDs. They include strengthening existing specialised networks and setting out what good care looks like through a rare disease equality standard. It has also stressed that it is vital that rare disease is not forgotten in upcoming policies such as the NHS's 10-year plan, which I will refer to later. In that plan, it is really important that we—by which I mean the Government and the Minister—can give hope to people who suffer from those diseases, and it is really important that they do not think they are on their own. The evidential base response from the Minister would give them that assurance, and it is important that the progress made to date by the UK rare diseases framework is built on. That is my first question: is the rare diseases framework part of the NHS 10-year plan?

I want to share an example that has been highlighted to me of someone who has felt the personal impact of rare autoimmune rheumatic disease. Zoi lives with a life-threatening RAIRD, granulomatosis with polyangiitis vasculitis. In her words, she is “lucky” because she had a relatively short journey to diagnosis. When she looks at others, she thinks she is lucky. I would like everybody who suffers from these diseases to have the same luck—if luck is the word. I do not believe in luck; my personal opinion is that everything is predestined. I am interested in how we make it better.

The quick diagnosis came only because Zoi's GP recognised her symptoms and knew to refer her right away. Does every doctor have that knowledge? I hope

they have, but they might not have the personal observation of that doctor. The difference was that he had had a friend who had died of the disease, so he knew what to look out for and red-lighted those symptoms.

Despite Zoi's positive experience of diagnosis, however, her experience of care since has been variable—that is the second stage. Following diagnosis of the disease, the care system works its way out. She has faced long waits for appointments and poor communication between teams responsible for her care. In one instance, she received a letter from a consultant four months after the date of the appointment. Was that the fault of the Royal Mail? I do not know. It was not Zoi's fault that she did not know about the appointment until it was too late. It meant that she had been taking a medication unnecessarily for months longer than needed.

It is about early diagnosis, treatment going forward and speed and urgency in the process to make it happen. Zoi works for a charity that supports other people living with vasculitis. She describes it as “heartbreaking” that hers is one of the best diagnostic journeys one will hear of. She has been diagnosed and gone through the NHS process to get out the other side and try to be better. As she says, hers is one of the best diagnostic journeys, but how can the rest be improved?

How do we improve care? Speedy diagnosis should not be down to Zoi's word “luck”. People such as Zoi living with serious rare diseases should be able to access vital care when they need it. That is why I am calling on the Minister to consider the following recommendations advocated by RAIRDA. It is important to be aware of the issues.

The first recommendation is to ensure that rare diseases are a focus of the NHS 10-year plan. I am always pleased to see the Minister in his place. I mean that genuinely, not to give the Minister a big head. He comes with an understanding that we all greatly appreciate—I do and am sure everybody else does. Will there be a focus in the 10-year plan on rare diseases? I am pretty sure the answer will be yes, but we need confirmation of that in *Hansard* today. We need to reassure our constituents who are struggling with disease and are unsure what the future means for them.

The UK rare diseases framework, introduced just three years ago in 2021, has been a significant step forward in securing equity of treatment for rare diseases. I welcome that, but sometimes the system does not work as well as it should. It is crucial that the Government do not lose sight of the work done to date to drive change for people living with rare conditions. Good work has been done, and I always like to recognise good work. It is important that we give encouragement to those who are working hard, and it is important sometimes to think, when we are ploughing away, what we are getting for it. Many of us—all of us in this room, for instance—appreciate what our NHS does. The good work that has happened for those with rare conditions needs to continue with the same zest, enthusiasm and fervour as it has done in the past.

It is particularly important that the working groups on the NHS 10-year health plan consider how improvements in rare disease care will be championed in that plan. In addition, it is important that the plan considers how the work plan of the UK rare diseases framework will be continued past the framework's end point in 2026. That is my second ask. I am sure that

within the 10-year plan the Government are committed to that continuation, but I need to personally reassure my constituents and we need to reassure the nation. We need to reassure those 170,000 individuals and their families and friends.

The framework has been an important tool in co-ordinating methods to improve care for rare diseases, and not just in England. I understand that health is a devolved matter, but this is how it works: whatever happens here, health-wise, is the next stage for us back in Northern Ireland, through the Health Minister. I was talking to another Health Minister on the tube coming here, and we were saying how important that co-ordination across all four regions is. It is good to push for that here, and to see it received back home.

The framework has been an important tool in co-ordinating methods to improve care for rare diseases, not just in England but across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The numbers of people suffering in Northern Ireland may seem small numerically, because we are a region of 1.9 million people, but the impact is huge. I am overtly aware that health is a devolved matter, but I am also aware that the standard can and should be UK-wide. The Minister always gives me and those from other parts of this great United Kingdom reassurance on the co-ordination between here and the Northern Ireland Assembly. I know he has met the Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt, and I am sure they will meet again in the foreseeable future.

How do we develop a standard of care? The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence quality standards consist of defined, measurable statements that can be audited to reduce variations in cases throughout the country. A rare disease quality standard would help to incentivise an increased focus on delivering high-quality care and treatment for rare conditions in the NHS, including rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases. That is my third ask: to develop the standard of care we need to have a quality standard, which would help to incentivise all the regions—all the parts of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland collectively; better together.

Work in this area is already well under way. RAIRDA has been working hard with organisations across the rare disease community to understand what good care looks like for people living with rare disease, and how that should be reflected in quality statements. Has the Minister had the opportunity to talk to the alliance? I am sure he has; I do not doubt that for a second. It would be good to have that liaison to help to bring together the ideas from the alliance and the Government. It is important that the current work to develop quality statements is built on in a timely way, with the swift development of a rare disease quality standard.

On my fourth request, it is clear that we need development in IT capacity in the fight for diagnosis, to ensure that more people can experience a quick diagnosis, like Zoi did. We need to increase funding for research into the diagnostic journey for rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases, to aid the development of diagnostic technology. It is really important that we look towards the next stage on research and development. How do we do that?

To sidestep slightly, today's paper—I think it was the *Express*—said that the Government should be doing something to look at dementia as the numbers rise. Although we are talking about rare diseases that will be well down the Government's to-do list, early diagnosis is important, as is research and development to improve

the capacity to find a cure, to lessen the pain and to lengthen the time that people have in this world. Again, any indication of what is happening with research and development would be greatly appreciated.

Investment in research would help to identify blockers to rapid diagnosis, as well as supporting the development of digital tools for faster and more accurate diagnoses. Some months ago my colleague, the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), asked the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care a question in the Chamber about the report on the way forward for the NHS. He mentioned the need for digital data tools, and the Secretary of State replied very positively, so I think the Government are looking into this, but it is important that we have the digital tools in place. With better data and more accuracy, we can help to speed up the process and find a better way forward.

Because of their rarity, it is unrealistic to expect every hospital to have clinicians with expert knowledge of rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases. I understand that, as we cannot know everything. Clinicians may have a small portion of knowledge, but this subject requires expert knowledge, so we need another way of doing it. A 2024 survey found that 29% of respondents were not very, or not at all, confident that the specialist healthcare professionals providing their care understood their condition. How do we improve that? I understand that we are in difficult, financially straitened times, and the Government have rightly committed a large sum of money to the NHS and health services—as they should, and I support that entirely—but we need improvement. My fifth ask of the Minister is: how can we do better? If 29% of respondents are not very confident, or not at all confident, we need to address that.

I believe that improvement can be achieved by developing specialised networks for rare autoimmune rheumatic conditions. Such networks would allow health professionals to access the knowledge and expertise of tertiary specialists, while also developing the capability and capacity to provide more care and treatment locally. I feel that would be the answer to my fifth question, and I am interested to hear the Minister's thoughts.

Networks already exist, with an excellent example being the Eastern Network for Rare Autoimmune Disease, established in 2016. We have a system in place, so let us look at it—not in a judgmental way—to see what it is doing and where improvements can be made. The network was formed to maximise patient access to relevant expertise while keeping their care as close to home as possible. This has been achieved by setting up excellent communication and cascading training to enable much better co-ordination, digital data sharing and contact between specialised centres and local trusts.

The network lead has calculated that the network's creation has saved the NHS money, so it has to be considered. The network runs at a cost of between £70,000 and £100,000, but it has generated annual savings estimated at between £150,000 and £200,000. That means that for every £1 spent, the NHS has saved £2, over a seven-year period, through a reduction in the use of inappropriate high-cost drugs.

On my sixth ask, networks throughout the country, like ENRAD, are run on the good will of clinicians. That is not sustainable, and it never can be. I respectfully ask the Minister to perhaps look at the ENRAD scheme, which is run on the good will of clinicians and has been very effective in how it responds, to see how such

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networks can be better helped to expand. If it saves money—if every £1 saves the NHS £2—then the financial equation is clear, and it should be pursued across all of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

To address this issue, the Government must provide the necessary financial support for networks to be developed and maintained. That funding would enable the creation of vital posts, such as meeting co-ordinators, and allow clinicians to be reimbursed for their time. Again, I feel that would be the right incentive. Good will is good to have, and there is much of it across this great nation, but, at the same time, there may be better ways of doing things. Such support would ensure that benefits for patients, and the NHS's budget, could be realised throughout the country. With the £25.3 billion committed to the NHS—I think that is the figure, but the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—this is another way to save money in the NHS, and it really should be done.

My last request is about specialist nurses, who can play a crucial role in supporting people living with rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases. The preliminary results from the 2024 survey show that respondents with access to a specialist nurse were more likely to report that they had access to enough information and support about their condition, compared with those who did not have any access to a specialist nurse. But less than three in 10 respondents—some 28%—had accessed information from a specialist nurse, and this varied widely by condition group. Wow: how important is the role of specialist nurses? I would be reassured if the Minister came back to me in respect of the critical role they play, perhaps exclusively. If only 28% of people have access to information from a specialist nurse and it should be more, what can be done to improve that?

Finally, when developing the NHS workforce plans, will the Minister consider what more can be done to recruit more specialist nurses to support people with rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases? We must always consider the fact that although the chances of getting a rare disease may be one in 10,000, the reality is that the patient deserves all the help we can offer, from diagnosis to treatment and support. I ask the Minister—very kindly, sincerely and humbly—to clarify whether that is this Government's goal. I believe that it is, but it is not about me today; it is about the people we represent in this House, collectively, together, across this great nation. I believe we have an important role to play.

RAIRDA, with all the clinicians and all the charities, has brought together some positive ideas that can help us together. This is not about blame—it is never, ever about blame; it is about how we do it better. On behalf of my constituents who have contacted me, and others who will speak shortly, and for the shadow Minister and the Minister, we put forward our case and look forward to support from Government.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they want to be called in the debate.

9.59 am

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this issue before us today, because it is one of those subjects that does

not get the attention that it needs. It is really important to tease out some of the issues, because there is a danger that they could be forgotten if we do not. The hon. Gentleman pushes this matter time and again.

The whole question of rare autoimmune rheumatic disease needs to be set in the context of the wider issue of rare diseases, which are conditions that affect less than one in 2,000 people. There are 7,000 rare diseases, affecting one in 17 people, which is 3.5 million people. They can be of a genetic or non-genetic origin and they affect adults and children. Some 75% of rare diseases affect children and more than 30% of children with a rare disease die before their fifth birthday. That is a sobering statistic.

We have to put the issue into that context: it affects the lives of so many people, not just those who are directly affected by the particular disease, but their family members and friends. A disease can also have an impact on someone's work-life balance and their job, as well as more broadly. There are challenges, but I thank the Rare Autoimmune Rheumatic Disease Alliance for bringing those groups together to push for this issue. It believes, as we all do, that getting together gives us more strength. I support that, and I have no doubt that the Minister supports that too.

We do not want rare diseases, particularly this type of disease, to be left at the back of the queue. The Government acknowledge that, so I am not pointing the finger at them, or at health professionals. Many people with this type of disease say that they do not get the support they need, but they do not blame individual clinicians, practitioners or healthcare workers; they blame the system in so far as it does not bring those professionals together in, for example, the clinical networks that the hon. Member for Strangford referred to. This is not a finger-pointing exercise, but it is important that where we can identify, and have identified, problems in the system, it is our responsibility to try to fix those problems.

The hon. Gentleman also touched on the need for defined, measurable and identified standards to reduce inequalities in healthcare provision. RAIRDA is working with others to set out key statements that it believes will form the quality standards for the future. It has set out the challenges, such as the challenge of focusing on this issue and the points that the hon. Gentleman raised that the time from symptoms to diagnosis can be from two and a half years to as much as five years, and potentially beyond.

There is also a challenge with access to specialist knowledge and expertise, and the hon. Gentleman's valid point, which I repeat, about the need for those specialist networks. There is the challenge of getting support out to the people—the professionals—dealing with our constituents in one way fashion or another. I know the UK rare diseases framework, and the England rare diseases action plan in my case, has been trying to help patients to get a diagnosis faster but we need to do more.

There has been a push to raise awareness among professionals, but we need to do more there. We need better co-ordination of care and improved access to specialist care, treatment and drugs. We also need to focus on the needs of the various nations. Although they all face similar problems, it is important to have a focus at a national and potentially regional level.

I support the hon. Gentleman, who made important points. We will no doubt come back to this issue. I know that the Minister will respond, as he always does, constructively and positively, so I look forward to hearing what he and Members from other parties have to say. I will finish by saying to the hon. Gentleman that at no point during my contribution did I mention either Shakespeare or Sophocles.

10.4 am

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this debate on a subject that all too often does not get enough attention, but that is important and affects millions of people. I also thank the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for his contribution.

More than 160,000 people in the UK live with rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases. Identifying, treating and caring for those people is complex. Yesterday, my constituent Carrie told me about her experience. She suffers from a number of conditions and has done since she was diagnosed 30 years ago. Interestingly, for someone who has carried those conditions for 30 years, she considers herself fortunate to have been diagnosed with Raynaud's and lupus at a young age, because it allowed her to start treatment early and receive consistent care. She knows from experience that early diagnosis and treatment makes a real difference, a point that has already been made by hon. Members.

While Carrie believes that she has been lucky and has received good care, she stressed that many people face years of misdiagnosis or dismissal, and poor or almost non-existent care. Those failures only exacerbate their symptoms further down the line. Sadly, one of those less fortunate than Carrie is her own mother, who lives not in Sussex but in Yorkshire, and also has multiple autoimmune conditions. Contrastingly, however, she has always been made to feel like a hypochondriac—not an unusual experience for those seeking help with rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases.

Carrie's mother was eventually diagnosed after many unnecessary years of suffering. She suffered for longer and to a greater degree simply because no one believed her or was able to diagnose her. Carrie told me that a postcode lottery exists in the quality of care for those with these conditions. It really is down to the specific medics and practitioners who an individual meets as to how well their condition is identified and whether treatment can begin.

Carrie's Raynaud's is particularly debilitating in winter. She told me that more awareness of the issues around the conditions and how symptoms can be alleviated is vital. Often, solutions can be as simple as helping with buying things such as thermal gloves or socks.

Another major challenge has been the impact of her autoimmune conditions on her teeth, particularly with the Sjögren's that she suffers from. Carrie has spent thousands and thousands of pounds on private dental care over the years—the only option as NHS treatment was not available. Despite that money, Carrie now thinks that it is not long until she will have very few teeth left.

Carrie thinks that the current system is disjointed, with her dentist not understanding the issues surrounding her conditions, and her rheumatologist likewise not

understanding the impact her conditions have on her dental health. She believes that a more co-ordinated, multidisciplinary approach to treating the conditions would help. It is clear from my conversation with Carrie that we simply must do better on this issue.

We must tackle the postcode lottery, exemplified by Carrie and her mother at opposite ends of the country; build a more joined-up system; and take rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases seriously so that we can start diagnosing earlier and more consistently. While the problems seem daunting, I believe that by collaborating—for example, with organisations such as RAIRDA—we can find solutions to the problems that Carrie told me about.

It is already Liberal Democrat policy to ensure that everyone with long-term health conditions has access to a named GP. We must also do better on dentistry, both generally, by sorting out the NHS contract and ensuring that we have a proper workforce plan for dentistry, and specifically, for people with those rare diseases that have a massive impact on dental health. As well as having access to a named GP, the Liberal Democrats are campaigning for the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to have greater capacity, which would help to speed up the process by which new treatments reach patients—a potential game changer for those suffering with such conditions.

We need change so that we can help the people living with those complex, long-term and debilitating conditions. The diseases may be complex, but I believe the solutions need not be. I am encouraged by the words of hon. Members today, and together, we can effect the change that Carrie, her mother and so many others need and deserve.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I call the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), to speak for His Majesty's loyal Opposition.

10.10 am

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership, Dr Huq, and thank you for the introduction.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his detailed canter through a subject that needs to be highlighted. He hit the nail on the head in relation to improving clinical pathways. We, as a House, need to think about the best way to do that, and to help the NHS to do that. He exemplified that by telling Zoi's story.

As the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) rightly highlighted, the impact on patients is the crux of the matter, which was also personified by the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) with her story about Carrie—what she and her mother have to go through, and the difficulties they are living and breathing every single day. The co-ordination of care is so important. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), who is no longer in his place, made a timely and pointed intervention about clinicians, awareness and training.

Being a clinician, and bringing that experience to the House, I believe it is difficult to identify the issues because they are often masked by other conditions. A random screening test may conclude rheumatoid factor, anti-CCP antibodies, ESR, CRP, ANA, ANCA, and even anti-ro and anti-la. All those may be positive or

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negative, and can be indicative of, but not definitive about, some of those conditions. That is part of the problem we have with those rare diseases. With 170,000 people affected, they are uncommon but common enough for us to see them. I certainly have treated several patients with conditions such as systemic lupus erythematosus, Sjögren's or Raynaud's.

When we think about these conditions, we need to break them into two distinct groups: the connective tissue disorders, such as lupus, scleroderma, myositis and Sjögren's, and vasculitis disorders, such as ANCA-associated vasculitis, giant cell arteritis and Behçet's. By their nature, because they are rare, they are hard to diagnose. I hope that in the future, we may well have artificial intelligence to help clinicians to identify, or at least to think about, the differential diagnosis when it comes to dealing with those patients.

It is a broad and difficult topic to break down, so it will be helpful to look in turn at the framework to address rare diseases, the research behind it, the diagnosis, the workforce, and, finally, the treatment. A framework to help the approach is important, so under the previous Government, the UK rare diseases framework was published in 2021 to set out a vision to improve the care for people with rare diseases. It set out four priorities: delivering early diagnosis, increasing awareness among health professionals, improving access to a specialist team and providing co-ordinated care. In essence, that is the care pathway.

The framework was designed to improve the speed of diagnosis, the co-ordination of care and the access to treatment. As RAIRDA said:

"The UK rare disease framework (2021) has been a significant step in securing equity of treatment for rare diseases, and going forwards, it is crucial that the Government does not lose sight of the work done to date to drive changes for people living with rare conditions."

Therefore, I ask the Minister my first question: how do the Government intend to build on the UK rare diseases framework to ensure that it remains adequately funded and relevant?

Next, we need the research, and that is the hardest part. As I mentioned, some of the tests cannot even diagnose conditions such as Behçet's syndrome; it is often a clinical diagnosis. The establishment of the Genomics England project, further mapping the genetic codes of individuals with rare conditions, was a move hailed by researchers worldwide. The programme, although ostensibly broad, directly benefits patients with rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases by identifying genetic markers and enabling targeted treatments. My second question to the Minister is: what progress has been made in expanding genetic research to uncover new treatment options for such diseases?

Earlier this year, the Government published an action plan that includes significant new commitments against each of those four framework priorities, including the health inequalities that we have heard so expertly talked about today. The action plan highlighted the significant investment in driving research on the diseases, including £14 million to the Rare Disease Research UK platform. That facilitates greater collaboration between academics, clinical and industry research, as well as people living with rare diseases, research charities and other stakeholders to try to accelerate the understanding, diagnosis and

therapy of these diseases. I was pleased to stand on a manifesto commitment to take forward the rare disease action plan.

I fully accept that more needs to be done, and the new Government must work closely with their delivery partners on the matter. I was pleased that in a recent written response, the Government reiterated their support for research into rare diseases. They further highlighted that the Department for Health and Social Care has invested £2.2 million to enable the National Institute of Health and Care Research to carry out research programmes related to rare genetic diseases, and of course the £340 million to Genomics England.

I did my medical training at the University of Birmingham medical school, which has the University of Birmingham Centre for Rare Disease Studies, a collaboration to try to pull together all the academic research. That is translational research. As we keep saying, these diseases are rare so, by definition, to do the trials, we need to have a wide pool to pull people together to try to work things out. I hope the hon. Member for Strangford will be interested in the fact that that university has joined with the Queen's University Belfast to research and collaborate across the four nations, including with Newcastle University. In 2015, I had the privilege of visiting that centre, and this is a note for him to look into that. Will the Government continue to increase funding specifically for rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases, especially within the Medical Research Council's care for rare disease programme?

Then we need to look at workforce and testing capacity. Over the last few years, the Government have allocated £2.3 billion to community diagnostic centres, of which there are almost 170 across the country. Those are really important for doing blood tests, ultrasounds, MRI scans and CT scans. In my constituency, I am lucky enough to have had £24 million invested; one is being built as we speak. That is revolutionary for our area, because for too long people had to travel to the likes of the George Eliot Medical Centre or to Leicester. Now they can have these tests in their community, providing swifter access. I hope that that will help people like Zoi, about whom we have heard, by making sure that she is one of the lucky ones who gets swift access.

Within that, we also need the people who can do the tests and understand the specialisms, so will the Minister tell us whether the Government will be expanding the network of CDCs any further? On staffing, the last Government brought forward the NHS workforce plan. How are this Government looking at addressing rheumatology and radiology in that plan to make sure there are no gaps?

Treatment is the one thing we are looking for. We have the diagnosis, but we need the treatment. Innovative drugs are coming, including immunotherapies, but they often come with high price tags. NICE is looking at how to speed things up, but will the Government commit to accelerating the processes so that we can make sure people get these innovative drugs as quickly as possible? We should not forget that standard drugs are used as well, including methotrexate. They can be quite dangerous, so I ask the Government what they are doing to ensure safe use of such drugs. Disease-modifying medications are important, but they can have high toxicity if not used properly, so they can cause harm. Safety is really important.

The previous Government's legacy is one of frameworks being established, investment being made and a road to improve lives. For the 2024 general election, RAIRDA published a manifesto that called on the Government to ensure that rare diseases remain a priority, to develop a quality standard for rare diseases and to develop better support for specialist networks. How will the Government work to consider and address those points? I hope this debate has highlighted exactly those calls, because we unanimously agree that this is what we need: research, networks, support and treatments for the individuals who are suffering.

10.19 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I want to call him an hon. Friend because he is a friend, but convention dictates that I must call him an hon. Member—and I welcome the fact that he cares so much about health-related issues. I now see him more than I see my wife, because he is always in debates about a whole range of health conditions, and he brings so much passion to those debates. Importantly, he highlights rare diseases. I thank him for the way he made his case this morning, and for speaking about Zoi's experience. When we humanise these things, we make them all the more impactful.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for his contributions, and I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett), for humanising the issue through Carrie's story; that is crucial. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), brings his professional experience to this debate, and that cannot be underestimated. I confess that I am not a medical professional, but in health debates it is important to listen to the expertise of those who work in the sector and on the frontline. I thank him genuinely for the way he has approached the debate. This is not a party political, knockabout debate; it is something on which we all want to see progress. The beauty of Westminster Hall is that we can leave the knockabout to the main Chamber, and in this room we can get into the detail of important subjects that are often overlooked. I pay tribute to those who are affected by rare disease, including rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases, and to their families.

The work of patient organisations such as RAIRDA is vital in raising awareness and campaigning to improve the lives of people who are living with rare diseases, and I thank those who dedicate their lives to this community. It is important to make the point that although rare diseases are individually rare, they are collectively common. One in 17 people will be affected by a rare condition over their lifetime. People living with rare diseases may face additional challenges in accessing health and social care. As the hon. Member for Mid Sussex said, this applies to a whole range of health services, including dentistry, and I hope that the Minister responsible for dentistry will pick that up. I will ensure that he receives her comments, because dentistry is often overlooked when it comes to people with rare conditions.

We are committed to improving the lives of people who are living with rare conditions. As the hon. Member for Strangford mentions, the UK rare diseases framework

outlines four priorities to achieve this aim: helping patients to get a final diagnosis faster; increasing awareness of rare diseases among healthcare professionals; bettering co-ordination of care; and improving access to specialist care, treatments and drugs. Rare diseases are a priority for the Government. In England, we publish a rare diseases action plan annually, which details the specific steps we are taking to meet the shared priorities of the framework. Each action has an owner, desired outcomes and detail about how we will measure and report on progress. This Government are committed to delivering on the priorities framework, and we are working to publish the next England action plan in early 2025.

The UK rare diseases framework comes to an end in 2026, and I know that the rare disease community would like the policy to continue, to maintain the momentum and progress made over the lifetime of the previous framework. It is UK-wide and agreed across the devolved nations, and I am more than happy to discuss it further with colleagues in Wales and Scotland and, for the hon. Member for Strangford, with Mike Nesbitt, the Health Minister in Northern Ireland. I am the UK Health Minister with responsibility for engagement with the devolved Administrations when it comes to health and social care; indeed, we have a meeting with them and with the Secretary of State tomorrow to discuss a whole range of subjects. I am more than happy to discuss this issue further with colleagues to see if we can maintain four-nation co-ordination in this area. I believe that if we can do so, we should. I give the hon. Member for Strangford my commitment that I will take the matter up with the devolved Health Ministers to see if we can continue the four-nation approach.

In England, I am committed to working towards the four priorities of the framework, which were identified through the 2019 national conversation on rare diseases. Alongside the evaluation of England's rare disease action plans commissioned through NIHR, the Department will undertake engagement next year to inform future policy decisions. The Government are committed to providing the best diagnosis and care for rare diseases, as set out in the UK rare diseases framework. Good diagnosis should be timely and accurate, and I know that people living with rare diseases often face journeys that are years long—diagnostic odysseys—before they receive an answer.

As the shadow Minister set out, many health professionals are involved in a patient's journey, from those in specialist testing and genetic screening to GPs and primary care professionals. Raising awareness of rare conditions among those professionals is one way in which we can help to speed up diagnosis. I know that every experience of living with a rare disease is unique, and, with more than 7,000 identified rare diseases, we focus on addressing shared challenges across all rare diseases.

Although the increasing use of genetic testing is an groundbreaking tool in diagnosis, many conditions, including rare rheumatic autoimmune diseases, do not have an identified genetic component, so it is important that overall awareness, diagnostics and quality of care continue to serve all people living with rare conditions. NHS England is working to improve awareness of rare diseases among healthcare professionals, including those in primary care, through the NHS England genomics education programme, which includes non-genetic rare

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diseases. The GEP provides education and training to support the specialist and wider workforce to diagnose rare conditions early and to know how to deliver the best possible care for patients and families—the shadow Minister mentioned that. Working with partners such as Medics 4 Rare Diseases, the GEP has created genomic notes for clinicians, GeNotes, an innovative digital educational resource for healthcare professionals. The GEP works to provide information to GPs where and when they need it—for example, by presenting at primary care educational events, producing blended learning modules for GP trainees or ensuring regular reviews of the curriculum of the Royal College of General Practitioners.

The shadow Minister rightly mentioned research. I reassure him that the Department of Health and Social Care—this started on the previous Government's watch, and we rightly are continuing the progress—supports research into rare diseases through the NIHR. The NIHR is the nation's largest funder of health and care research, and it welcomes funding applications for research into any aspect of human health, including rare diseases. The usual practice of the NIHR and other research funders is not to ringfence funds for expenditure on particular topics. The “Rare Diseases Research Landscape Project Report” described investment of almost £630 million from MRC and NIHR programmes in rare disease research over five years. We are now working with the rare diseases community to further understand the gaps and the priorities, and to get them into those research pathways so that we can, we hope, fill the gaps.

As many rare diseases are chronic and affect multiple body systems, those living with rare disease face complex condition management, and interact with many specialists and providers of health and social care. That can include travelling across the country to access highly specialised care from experts. All of that can add up to a significant emotional and physical burden, and deepens existing inequalities. Co-ordination of care is essential to ensure that care is effectively managed, that the burden on patients and their carers is minimised and that healthcare professionals are working together to provide the best possible joined-up and high-quality care.

Last year, we hosted a workshop with RAIRDA to explore how best to support people living with “non-genetic” rare diseases. That highlighted the importance of specialised networks of care in delivering high-quality care at value for money. As we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford, networks, such as the Eastern Network for Rare Autoimmune Disease, are an example of best practice. I encourage integrated care boards to consider similar models across the whole country for types of rare diseases. I am more than happy to look closely at how we can seek to spread that best practice across the country, across different rare disease types and across ICBs, because patients with rare conditions deserve the same quality, safety and efficacy in medicines as other patients with more common conditions.

NICE, the MHRA and NHS England are working to understand and to address challenges preventing treatments for rare conditions from reaching patients who need them. I take on board precisely the points that the shadow Minister raises about the new drugs, how we ensure faster access and how we create the environment

whereby clinical trials are more readily available in the United Kingdom. I want to assure Members that that is a central part not just of our health mission but of the Government's economic mission, because we want the United Kingdom to be a base for investment in life sciences, in medtech and in access to clinical trials, so that our patients win as well as our economy. We have to ensure that safety is foremost in our deliberations. Safety is paramount, and we must ensure, in whatever regulatory regime that we have to encourage the life sciences, medtech and data industries into the UK, that safety is never compromised. I take on board fully the comments made by the shadow Minister.

NICE has also been working with RAIRDA to create a quality standard for rare diseases. That will find commonalities across the more than 7,000 identified rare diseases to develop standards that will drive quality improvement across multiple rare disease groups. Although the majority of rare diseases are genetic, others, such as rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases, do not yet have an identified genetic cause, as I said. A study by Genetic Alliance UK suggests that such conditions often have higher prevalence, impacting on a significant number of people, so it is important that both genetic and non-genetic conditions are considered.

Approximately 3.5 million people in the UK live with a rare condition, and addressing shared challenges across all conditions will be central to this Government's approach. In addition, shared challenges across the health and social care system are often exacerbated for people living with rare diseases, such as access to mental health support—something else that the hon. Member for Mid Sussex mentioned. A central mission of this Government is to build a health and care system fit for the future.

The hon. Member for Strangford referred to our 10-year health plan. I reassure the House that that is intended to focus on the three shifts needed to deliver a modern NHS—not just fixing our NHS, but making it fit for the future, for the next 10, 20 or 30 years, putting it on a modernised footing as well as fixing the fundamentals. The three shifts are moving from hospital to community, from analogue to digital and from sickness to prevention. Those shifts offer opportunities to improve time to diagnosis and care for people living with rare diseases. Many highly specialised services for rare diseases must be delivered in hospitals to ensure the high standards of expert care that we want to see, but we can improve co-ordination of care to deliver better treatments closer to where people live, where possible. While many rare diseases are not preventable, early diagnosis can lead to interventions that improve health outcomes.

On the point made by the shadow Minister about community diagnostic centres, the Government's commitment is to continue that programme. Indeed, I have seen the benefits of it myself—I got to open the new CDC at Crownpoint in Denton in my constituency in July. It is already having a game-changing impact on the local community, giving faster diagnosis and getting people into treatment more quickly, with better outcomes and better patient experiences for those who access the facilities.

The 10-year plan will ensure a better health service for everyone, regardless of condition or service area. On 21 October, we launched a national conversation on the future of the NHS, inviting views from across the country on how to deliver a health service fit for the future. Patients, staff and organisations can make themselves

heard by logging on to the online portal, change.nhs.uk. I encourage hon. Members to do the same and to encourage their constituents to do likewise, if they have not done so already.

Unmet need remains, however, for people living with rare diseases, including rare autoimmune rheumatic conditions. I reaffirm that I am deeply committed, as is this Government, to working across the health and care system and with the rare disease community to address that need.

Finally, on workforce, the hon. Member for Strangford and other Members asked if the goal of the Government is to ensure that a patient gets the treatment, and that we get that treatment with the workforce we have. Getting that right workforce will be key. I reassure Members that the goal of the Government is to ensure that the patient, as they deserve, gets all the help that the NHS can offer in treatment, care and support.

The 10-year health plan will deliver those three big shifts on hospitals to community, analogue to digital, and sickness to prevention. To support delivery of the plan, the Secretary of State has confirmed that next summer we will refresh the NHS long-term workforce plan. That will help to ensure that the NHS has the right people in the right places with the right skills to deliver the care that patients need when they need it, not just today but in the future. The shifts we want to see in the delivery of healthcare will require us to rethink the kind of workforce we need in 10 years' time.

Dr Luke Evans: I am grateful to the Minister for acknowledging the workforce, and for looking at the workforce plan. I was aware of the Health Secretary's plan to revisit this, and the Minister talks about it being done next year. Does he have a timescale for how long the review will take? The danger, especially in healthcare, is that modernisation happens so quickly that, by the time we review something, it is already out of date and needs another review. This is always a chicken-and-egg situation. I would be grateful for a timescale.

Andrew Gwynne: We will refresh it next summer, and the Department is already beginning to think about whether this is what the shifts are intended to bring about, and whether these are the outcomes we want to see as a result of those shifts. If we are to have a neighbourhood health service that delivers much more in a community setting, how do we ensure we have the right skills and the right workforce to deliver that?

Particularly with the shift from analogue to digital, we will need a lot more tech-savvy clinicians, too. How do we build in some of the massive advances in artificial intelligence into medical devices and medical technology? We will be doing that concurrently with the 10-year plan to make sure that the workforce plan refresh is ready to go. This will allow us to embed the future, not just today's practices, into the training and recruitment processes for the immediate future. The refresh will begin next summer, but it is a chicken-and-egg situation. We need to work out what the future of the NHS will look like, and then we have to ensure that we have the skills to meet that ambition—not just for today, but for the future.

In closing, I again thank my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford, for raising such an important matter, and I thank the rare diseases community for their continued and constructive engagement with the

Government to help bring about meaningful change. I hope I have reassured the hon. Gentleman both on cross-UK working—and I take up his challenge to try to get colleagues across the devolved Administrations to agree to continue a UK-wide approach—and on my specific responsibility here in England. We will take forward the four areas identified in the UK plan. We will have a new plan for England, and we will seek to make the significant progress that I believe all Members of this House want to see happen.

I am more than happy to work collegiately with Members across the House, whose role is to scrutinise the Government, to hold our feet to the coals and to make sure we do what is in the plan at the best speed and pace for people living with these conditions. I also accept that I am not the sole fount of all wisdom in this area.

Dr Luke Evans: No!

Andrew Gwynne: I know the shadow Minister is surprised by that. Genuinely, whatever people bring to the table, whether it is personal experience, professional expertise or their constituents' stories, we need to share that knowledge so that we can improve how we deliver the outcomes we want to see for people living with rare diseases. I stand willing and ready to work with hon. Members across the House, and indeed with organisations that champion this area, so we can get the best outcomes that people deserve.

10.44 am

Jim Shannon: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I refer first of all to the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd). It is always a pleasure to hear him make his contribution. Even when there are things that are said in other debates which I may challenge, he always delivers his contribution in a lovely way and not many people can do that. Today he delivered something that we all agree with. I thank him for that and I mean that sincerely, but he knows that. He referred to the effect upon the family. He is right, and also right that those who want to work are not able to. He said he did not want to see these diseases at the back of the queue and he is right on that as well. All those things are pertinent to the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) referred to awareness and training. Again, a very salient intervention for which I thank him. The Minister is right that there is no better way of telling a story than giving an example, and the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) told of her good friend, Carrie, and the effect upon her and upon her mummy as well. Sometimes they were wondering what it was all about when the condition worsened, and how the health service responds is critically important.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), brings to any debate his wealth of knowledge—from his own personal experience and from his vocation as well—and he does so sincerely. He referred to the two groups: those with tissue and those with vasculitis. He referred to the vision for the rare disease framework and the new action plan. I did not previously know about the tie-up between Birmingham, Newcastle and Queen's University Belfast for research and development and I was really interested to hear about it. I know about some of the things Queen's

[Jim Shannon]

University do but I did not know about that specifically and so I thank him for that, and for the wee reminder of how to get onto that as well. That has really been helpful.

I am encouraged by what I have heard today. I referred to research networks and support, and working collectively to make this situation better. Disease modification drugs need to be regulated. This is a wee reminder of some of the things to be done—it is not always straightforward by the way, either.

This debate was never about me or about any of us here. It is about patients and our constituents; about those who we serve in this place. Today I think the Minister has developed a very positive response. All of those out there—my constituents, and those of the hon. Member for Mid Sussex and of the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth—will be encouraged, because they will be listening to this debate and they will want to know what the Government are going to do. They will be encouraged by the things the Minister referred to: highlighting the rare diseases, the personal stories, to raise awareness. That the diseases are rare but collectively they are common was a salient and poignant comment. On measuring and reporting progress, he referred to the 2026 end of the framework but the Minister gave us assurance—he referred to a mission and to contacting the four nations so they can approach it together and commit together. I think that is also an answer to one of the questions I asked. That is what the Minister has committed himself to doing and we should be reassured by that.

Diagnosis should be timely and accurate, and the Minister referred to GeNotes and the digital improvements. That is really important as well. He also referred to NICE, to encourage research and development for rare diseases because we have to look forward to someday hopefully finding a solution. He also referred to the ENRAD, which is a good model for all to follow. Government will put this idea to the fore, where there has been a good example. The Minister is right about the economic and health commitment for clinical trials, so that our patients win each time. He also made encouraging comments about training and workforce—early prevention, faster diagnosis, better outcomes. I think those who have rare diseases—170,000 across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and all the families of those people—will today be encouraged by this debate and the contributions from all sides. Most importantly, I say a sincere thank you to the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases.

10.49 am

Sitting suspended.

Cleve Hill Solar Park

11 am

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I will call Helen Whately to move the motion, and then I will call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention with these 30-minute wonders.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of Cleve Hill Solar Park on communities in Faversham and Mid Kent constituency.

For centuries, the view from Graveney church tower has been spectacular, looking across miles of marshland to the Swale beyond. In the summer, there are wide-open blue skies and sheep grazing in the sunshine among the rushes going down to the sparkling water of the estuary. In the winter, still beautiful if bleak, there are clouds scudding across a grey horizon, down to the froth of white horses on galloping waves, accompanied by the cries of seabirds, calling as they circle overhead, buffeted by wind and rain.

This epic landscape inspired great British writers such as Charles Dickens and Daniel Defoe. Since then, it has continued to inspire countless visitors and locals alike—the backdrop for walkers travelling the ancient Saxon Shore way, a haven for birdwatchers and the seabirds they have travelled to see, or just a place to find peace and tranquillity in our otherwise busy lives. But no more.

In 2020, planning permission was granted to build Cleve Hill solar park. In 2021, the park was acquired by Quinbrook Infrastructure Partners, a US investment fund based in Texas. In 2023, construction began. Now, as we near the end of 2024, the work is nearly done. Soon, the village of Graveney in my constituency will host the UK's largest solar power plant, generating 373 MW of electricity. Alongside the solar array, the developers have permission for a large-scale battery installation, with up to 700 MWh of capacity. The concrete base for the batteries is being constructed, and the batteries themselves are now in the country, soon to be installed. The plant is set to become operational early next year.

As I speak about this huge solar installation in my constituency, hon. Members should make no mistake: I recognise climate change as one of the greatest threats to our planet and way of life. I want us to continue our shift to renewable energy, reduce our carbon footprint and improve our energy security, and that includes solar. I welcome solar on factory and warehouse roofs, housing developments, brownfield sites and even out-of-the-way pockets of poor-quality land. But Cleve Hill is altogether different. When complete, the solar park will cover more than 700 acres—an area larger than the town of Faversham itself. It will have not far off 1 million solar panels, each the height of a double-decker bus. No amount of natural screening can prevent this huge installation from dominating the landscape.

It is not just about the views. The marshes were home to rare species, including Brent geese, golden plover, marsh harriers and the red-listed lapwing. The humble dormouse and water voles also thrived in the dykes and field margins. Before the Cleve Hill solar team arrived, there was a totally different vision for this spot. The Environment Agency planned to restore the marshes to

a wetland, which would have provided a haven for the wildlife, sequestered carbon and acted as a natural flood defence.

As someone who has stood knee-high in flood water in my own home, I do not take the risk of flooding lightly. As many as 17,000 homes are at risk from rising sea levels along the north Kent coast. Unfortunately, the planning inspector considered the solar development only against the agriculture land use at the time. Instead of Graveney's marshland being transformed into a haven for nature and a release for rising sea water, it has been transformed into an industrial zone.

Over the years since the solar scheme was announced, I have received hundreds of letters and emails from people asking me to stop it. I have worked with Graveney's excellent parish council, the Save Graveney Marshes campaign group and the GREAT campaign. All have worked hard to give the community a voice in the planning system, but to no avail. As a nationally significant infrastructure project, the final decision was taken away from local residents and our local council. I am told that when planning inspectors recommended that the development go ahead, there was little room for the Secretary of State to go against their recommendation, even though only 15 out of 867 public representations supported the project. Like many people, I was gutted when it was approved but we are where we are.

Since then, my focus, like the campaign groups, has switched to trying to reduce the harm and risks to the local community, and trying to claw back some benefit. That is why I have secured this debate. I am here to raise the three main areas of concern expressed by my constituents: safety, disruption and damage, and compensation for the community, who now have an industrial site on their rural doorstep. This is important to my constituents, but important to communities around the country facing large-scale solar developments; they, too, will want to hear what reassurances the Minister can offer.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. The issue of disruption is incredibly important. I have a number of quarries in my constituency, and I know only too well the damage and enhanced wear and tear that such sites can cause on smaller countryside roads—I do not know the hon. Lady's constituency, but I presume that that issue will affect it as well. Does she agree that the road safety implications of heavy goods vehicle traffic using these roads over a number of years must be a priority for the construction company? The only way to address that is to have open communication with the local community and a point person to deal with issues as they arise. Has the hon. Lady been able to persuade the construction company to do that?

Helen Whately: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which I will address in a moment. First, I want to talk about safety, because the safety of the large-scale battery installation is the biggest worry for my community.

To give a sense of the scale, Cleve Hill's battery capacity will be equivalent to half the output of a small gas-fired power station. Large-scale battery storage systems carry risks including overheating and fire, which can produce toxic fumes and water contamination. To date, more than 65 fires and explosions have been reported in similar battery storage systems across the world.

In March, I hosted a public meeting about battery safety, which was attended by Matthew Deadman, an assistant director at Kent Fire and Rescue Service and the National Fire Chiefs Council lead officer for alternative fuel and energy systems. Almost 50 Graveney residents attended the meeting, which demonstrates the considerable local concern. Matthew Deadman provided some reassurance by outlining the steps that the developer is taking to put in place the safety features set out in the project's battery safety management plan, but that has not allayed residents' fears.

Battery fires are notoriously difficult to extinguish, and people at the meeting found it hard to believe that the fire and rescue team at Faversham fire station—fabulous though they are—or even teams across east Kent more widely, would have the specialist equipment required. There is also the question of the contamination of land and water in the event of a fire.

Another outstanding concern was the lack of an evacuation plan in the event of a fire. The rationale we heard was that no evacuation would be needed, because toxic fumes and smoke would dissipate and it would be sufficient to close windows. However, residents and parents whose children attend the local school remain unconvinced.

Added to that is the potential for a fivefold expansion of the battery proposal found in the site's battery safety management plan. Although that may or may not happen in practice, physicist and former vice-chair of the Faversham Society, Professor Sir David Melville CBE, warns that the site does not have adequate space for such an increase in battery capacity while maintaining the 6-metre spacing between battery units that is advised by the National Fire Chiefs Council. In fact, the Kent Fire and Rescue Service was only satisfied with the site's battery safety management plan on the basis of the 6-metre gap being adhered to.

I am not alone in raising these concerns formally. Swale borough council scrutinised and rejected the battery safety management plan earlier this year, but its rejection has been overturned by the Planning Inspectorate, leaving the community with unanswered questions and a feeling that they have no say in the matter.

I am not the first Member to raise these concerns. Just over a year ago, a former Energy Minister said the Government intended to consult on including battery storage systems in the environmental permitting regulations at the earliest opportunity. I take that to be an acknowledgment that the current system is not up to the job. In a written question in September, I asked Ministers for an update on the timetable for the consultation, and I received the following response:

“The Government agrees with the need to have robust measures in place to manage the risks associated with facilities that use large numbers of lithium-ion batteries. Defra is considering further options, including environmental permitting, for managing the environmental and public health risks from fires at BESS sites.”

When she sums up, will the Minister advise me whether the Government will be adding battery storage systems to the environmental permitting regulations? If so, when will the consultation take place? If not, what approach to ensuring the safety of large-scale batteries do the Government intend to take? In the meantime, could the Minister tell me what agency is responsible for ensuring the safety of this development? Who will be inspecting it before it is switched on, and how will she ensure that

[Helen Whately]

these batteries are safe? I have been in her shoes, albeit in a different brief, and that is a question I would have been asking myself.

This issue is important not just for Graveney, but for the whole country. Large-scale batteries look likely to be an important part of our future energy infrastructure, which means we need to do this properly. Residents' concerns cannot be brushed aside as an inconvenience. We need a proper process that takes these worries seriously and ensures that large-scale battery installations are safe.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): My neighbouring constituency of Ashford has a big solar farm planned for it. I have recently listened to experts who have highlighted the risk of fire and toxic fumes from large batteries. Some of these farms are planned for rural areas that fire engines may not be able to access. These are genuine concerns. Does the hon. Lady agree that local concerns need to be addressed before planning permission is approved?

Helen Whately: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The issue is clearly of great concern to my constituents in the village of Graveney and the nearby town of Faversham, who are living close to the solar plant and the battery installation. We need to get it right in Graveney, and then we can use the same approach to get it right in other places, because this is not the one and only large-scale battery installation we expect to see. As I have said, these installations are likely to be part of our future energy infrastructure, so we must get it right in Graveney and across the country.

The second area of concern, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), is the impact of construction on local residents and, in my constituency, on the village of Graveney itself. Residents and schools have put up with many months of heavy construction traffic. It is down to the hard work of the community and people such as Mike Newman, the parish council chair, sitting down with the developer, that we now have an effective traffic management plan. That has mitigated the impact, and I recognise that the developer has played its part—for instance, by restricting lorry movements at certain times to accommodate the school—but even when construction ends, residents will be left with the consequences. Some houses have cracks in their walls thanks to the huge lorries thundering past day after day, and the lane through the village will need resurfacing. The community is looking to the developer and hoping that it will stick to its word and make good any damage, but the worry hangs over the village all the same, not least because no such requirement was part of the planning process, and nor is it set out in law.

That brings me to the final outstanding concern. When an unpopular planning decision is made locally, there is at least the silver lining of a section 106, or a community infrastructure levy contribution, which can go towards a new school, a GP surgery or a similar community facility, but not so with a nationally significant infrastructure project. I know that one of our challenges as a country is the time and cost required to build any new infrastructure, and I have no appetite to make that worse, but it is hard to stomach the fact that a small

village such as Graveney could find itself hosting a power station, in effect, and have nothing by way of compensation.

I am grateful to the developer for indicating that it will make a significant community contribution, and I know there is a discussion about the potential for a longer-lasting approach that could support the community over the lifetime of the project, as an alternative to a one-off. However, that begs the question of why the community is left relying on the good will of the developer. The Minister's Government intend a big overhaul of the planning process, with the objective, rightly, of ensuring that we get better at building infrastructure. I suggest that one way to do that is to ensure that there is something in it for the local community, especially when, as is the case here, it bears the brunt, with no discernible local benefit.

I will sum up to give the Minister time to reply. With regret, I accept the reality of Cleve Hill solar, the UK's largest solar installation, and the large-scale battery storage that comes with it. What I do not accept is the failure to address residents' concerns about safety, the failure to give residents certainty about repairing the damage from construction, and the feeling that the community is on its own, negotiating compensation from the developer for the industrialisation of the marshland it holds so dear.

On all three counts, I seek the Minister's assurance and action. To be clear, I am not advocating more red tape. This is about doing something better, not making it harder. If we get this right, we can improve how we build energy infrastructure in this country. That is important because we need more renewable energy generation capacity to meet our future energy needs, in a world where economic growth is likely to be dependent on energy-intensive computing power. All our futures depend on that, so let us ensure that we get it right, starting right here, right now, with Cleve Hill solar.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Kerry McCarthy): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) on securing the debate and giving us a chance to discuss an important topic, not just for her constituents. I hope she will understand, however, that due to the quasi-judicial role that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State plays in taking decisions on applications for development consent for energy infrastructure proposals, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on matters related to any specific proposals.

Although the development consent order for Cleve Hill solar park was granted by the previous Government in 2020, as she said, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero may still be involved in any proceedings relating to the implementation of that order. As a result, I cannot comment today on the details of that project. The reasons for the decision and details of supporting plans are available on the Planning Inspectorate's website, as the hon. Lady knows. I am afraid I cannot elaborate or speculate on that published material.

The hon. Member spoke eloquently about the importance of the site to her constituents—the views, the biodiversity and the birds, and the importance of wetlands. My colleagues

in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I are working closely on nature-based solutions to climate change, and wetlands play an important role. I am also glad that the hon. Member acknowledged the importance of reaching our net zero objectives, with that mission for clean power, by 2030.

As I said, I cannot speak specifically about Cleve Hill, but I hope I can reassure her by speaking in general terms about Government policy. First, it ensures that all local impacts are considered in the planning process. Secondly, it makes a steadfast commitment that those who host clean-energy infrastructure should benefit from it. In order to achieve our goal of clean power by 2030, we will need to deploy various renewable energy sources. According to the recent National Energy System Operator clean power pathway report, we need to increase solar deployment from 15 GW to 47 GW. Along with onshore wind, solar is the cheapest clean power option available to us right now, making it an essential part of the UK's energy mix. Without a substantial increase in solar deployment, the clean power mission becomes very difficult.

That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State relaunched the solar taskforce earlier this year. It is also the reason that the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), who has this portfolio, cannot reply to the debate, because he is at a meeting of the solar taskforce. The taskforce brings together the industry and Government to discuss the actions needed to rapidly increase the deployment of solar panels on rooftops and in solar farms, and it will publish its recommendations in a solar road map very soon.

We should never lose sight of the core motivation behind our clean energy mission. Clean power generated here in Britain will reduce our dependence on volatile imported fossil fuels. It will provide lower bills in the long term and create thousands of highly skilled future-proofed jobs across the country. Delivering those benefits for the British people requires the development of new infrastructure. We accept that a top priority should be the deployment of solar on rooftops. That is why we are bringing forward new standards to ensure that all newly built houses and commercial buildings are fit for a net zero future. We will encourage the installation of solar panels on those buildings where appropriate.

But we know that our mission will require more ground-mounted solar too, and decisive reform to the planning system is urgently needed to support that. As the Prime Minister said last week, we will streamline the approval process in the forthcoming planning and infrastructure Bill. As part of the new plan for change, in which the Prime Minister set out the milestones in how the Government will deliver on our national missions, we will work towards the new target of 150 major infrastructure projects, including energy projects. That will mean tripling the number of decisions on national infrastructure, compared with the previous Parliament. We recognise the impact that such new energy projects can have on local communities and the environment. The Government are committed to striking the right balance between those considerations when delivering the clean power mission.

All proposed solar projects are subject to a robust planning process. Most projects are assessed by local planning authorities themselves, and those assessments

are governed by the national planning policy framework, which encourages developers to engage with local communities before submitting an application. Local planning authorities will continue to seek representations from local communities and will continue to weigh local considerations against the need for renewable energy.

As the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said, larger projects such as the Cleve Hill solar park are decided centrally through the nationally significant infrastructure regime. That is a rigorous process. Developers whose projects qualify for the assessment must complete considerable community engagement before any decision is taken, and decision makers take into account its level and quality.

We recognise that new infrastructure can have an impact on the local community, and the planning system is designed to take account of the social, cultural, economic and environmental effects. Indeed, all large-scale solar developers are legally obliged to complete an environmental statement as part of any application for development consent. The hon. Members for Faversham and Mid Kent and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised disruption, which will be considered as part of the environmental statement.

The statement requires the developer to consider the potential environmental impact of a project, not just during the construction phase but during its life. It spans pre-development, construction and operation, all the way to decommissioning. The statement is a helpful tool that allows planning authorities to review any significant effects on biodiversity or the environment. I know the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent is committed to improving the natural environment, and she spoke eloquently about her vision for that part of her constituency. There is some evidence to suggest that solar can improve biodiversity when installed and managed appropriately. The environmental management plan for Cleve Hill includes commitments to build a habitat management area of 56 hectares, which is predicted to increase on-site biodiversity by 65%.

I want to touch briefly on the use of agricultural land for solar. I hope I can reassure the hon. Lady that the Government recognise that food security is linked to national security, and that we will always back British farming. In previous years, we worked together on the all-party parliamentary group for fruit and vegetable farmers, which she chaired, so I gained some knowledge of the importance she attaches to standing up for farmers in her constituency.

Planning guidance makes it clear that developers should situate their projects on brownfield or industrial sites whenever possible. Where the development of agricultural land is shown to be necessary, developers are steered away from using the best and most versatile land, and we have no plans to change that. We do not believe, however, that the accelerated deployment of solar power poses a threat to food security. The total area of land devoted to solar farms nationally is very small. Even in the most ambitious scenarios, less than 1% of the UK's agricultural land would be occupied by solar farms. My colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are developing a land use framework, which will consider issues such as food security and how we can expand nature-rich habitats. The framework will work hand in hand with the strategic spatial energy plan.

[Kerry McCarthy]

May I just ask, Dr Huq, will the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent be given a minute to respond?

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Not in a 30-minute debate.

Kerry McCarthy: Okay.

I come on to the issue of battery safety. I note that the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent said that members were given some reassurance at the community meeting she held but still have significant concerns about fire safety. As she knows, batteries are regulated by the Health and Safety Executive. The framework requires battery designers, installers and operators to take the necessary measures to ensure health and safety through all stages of the system's construction, operation and decommissioning.

The Government have updated the planning practice guidance to encourage battery storage developers to engage with local fire and rescue services and for local planning authorities to refer to guidance published by the National Fire Chiefs Council, which I note the hon. Lady said was represented at the meeting she held. The health and safety framework for batteries is kept under review to respond to changing circumstances. In 2018, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy set up an industry-led electricity storage health and safety governance group, whose members include the National Fire Chiefs Council, the Environment Agency and DEFRA. That group is responsible for ensuring that an appropriate, robust and future-proofed health and safety framework is sustained. My Department worked with it to develop and publish health and safety guidance for grid-scale batteries that aims to improve the understanding of existing health and safety standards, which the battery storage industry should apply to its own processes.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent mentioned DEFRA. As I understand, DEFRA is considering further options, including environmental permitting, for managing the environmental and public health risks from fire at grid-scale sites. I am happy to speak to my colleague in DEFRA who is responsible for that and get back to the hon. Lady on her specific question—she will appreciate that I cannot answer on their behalf today. If her constituents require any further reassurances on the safety issue, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) will be happy to follow up on that in writing.

In the few minutes I have left, I turn to community benefits. We absolutely understand that we need to fully engage with communities and bring them along with us

on our clean power mission, which includes public engagement and consultation. The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent asked specifically about community benefits. We know that communities are providing a service to the country as a whole when they host clean energy infrastructure, so there need to be benefits for them. Sometimes there is a direct benefit where the infrastructure is owned by the community—the benefit goes straight back into the community, whether it is through solar panels on a village hall or one of many other examples—but we are considering how best to deliver those community benefits to host communities. That includes looking at existing examples in Europe and further afield to see what has worked well.

A wide variety of community benefits can be delivered, including funding for local projects, investment in the local area, direct benefits to individuals and, as I said, opportunities for community ownership. Great British Energy will build on existing community energy schemes, helping communities to unlock opportunities through the local power plan. In the hon. Lady's constituency, up to 1,400 homes are powered by Orchard Community Energy, which is a community-owned solar farm near Sittingbourne that provides power to Swale and Medway. That puts communities at the heart of the energy transition and gives them a stake in the transition to net zero as owners and partners in clean energy projects.

As I said, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North, is today at the meeting of the solar taskforce, which brings together industry and Government. It is considering the question of how a community can benefit from the infrastructure that is hosted on their patch, and its recommendations will be published in the solar road map.

To conclude, the Government are committed to considering the interests of local communities affected by proposed energy infrastructure. I thank the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent for securing the debate and for giving me the opportunity to set out the Government's vision. We will work to balance the local impact of new projects with the delivery of our clean power mission. The renewable energy transition will always be done through co-operation rather than coercion, ensuring that all parties benefit on our journey to net zero.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Lobular Breast Cancer

[*VALERIE VAZ in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the treatment of lobular breast cancer.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I secured this debate in memory of my constituent, who was also my close friend, Heather Cripps. I welcome Heather's husband David and her sister Jenny to the Public Gallery. I will come to Heather's story shortly, but I also want to welcome to the Public Gallery my mother-in-law Cressida, who survived lobular breast cancer 22 years ago, as well as several others whose lives have been touched by lobular breast cancer. Many of them have provided me with briefings in preparation for the debate, for which I am grateful.

I met Heather in 2016 when, as someone who had pretty much never run for a bus before, I was roped into a free 5 km parkrun at 9 am on Saturday mornings in Dulwich park. Heather was a serious runner, and running was a huge part of her life. She took pity on me and decided that her inexperienced local MP needed a friend to run with, and she became that friend. We worked out that we lived close to each other, and it was not long before I was picking her up to go to the parkrun, and we would run together most weeks.

Heather was a dedicated public servant, spending her whole life working in the Home Office. It is a testament to her professionalism that she never spoke with me about the content of her work. What she did speak about as we ran was her family, her husband David and two precious daughters. Heather was an amazing mum. She spent so much of her time thinking about what her girls would enjoy, planning birthday parties and holidays and, earlier this year, plotting a trip to Wales to culminate in the surprise collection of a new puppy.

In 2020, at the height of the covid-19 pandemic, Heather started to get terrible back pain. For several months this was treated as a musculoskeletal issue. She was given pain medication, but it got worse and worse. Eventually, she was diagnosed with stage 4 invasive lobular breast cancer. The back pain was the result of the cancer having spread to her spine. For three years, chemotherapy held the cancer at bay but, when Heather came to Parliament almost exactly a year ago to campaign on lobular breast cancer, she mentioned to me that she once again had back pain, which she thought could be the cancer recurring.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady brings forward a very personal story. In this House, we know that personal stories are always the hardest to tell, but the ones that have more impact. I commend the hon. Lady for what she is doing today. We would all say that, but we mean it.

Helen Hayes: I thank the hon. Gentleman—who is my hon. Friend—very much indeed for that intervention.

Heather died in St Christopher's hospice near her home on 30 August. She was 48 years old. Shortly before she died, Heather's daughter, who was due to start secondary school in September, visited her mummy

in the hospice, so that she could see her in her school uniform. In that unbearable heartbreaking detail is why we must do better on lobular breast cancer: better on awareness of symptoms and better at research into treatments.

The heartbreak of Heather's story and the impact on her family and friends is sadly replicated for too many women and their loved ones throughout the UK. Lobular breast cancer is the second most common type of breast cancer, accounting for 15% of all breast cancers, and 22 women a day are diagnosed with lobular breast cancer in the UK. It behaves differently from other forms of the disease, mostly strikingly because it does not cause lumps, and it is often completely invisible on a mammogram.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate on such an important topic, and for so movingly sharing the story of her friend Heather. I want to raise the case of my constituent from Dalgety Bay. Just days before her surgery for lobular breast cancer, a mammogram was still unable to pick it up, exactly as my hon. Friend describes. It could not pick up the existence of her cancer at all. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a perfect example of why we so badly need more research and better diagnosis and treatment of lobular breast cancer for women across the UK?

Helen Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the story of her constituent to this debate. This is exactly the reason why we need to find better means of diagnosis and treatment for lobular breast cancer. I will come talk about some of those means shortly.

Currently, there are no treatments specific to lobular breast cancer. This must change. The issues have been well documented by Dr Susan Michaelis, founder of the Lobular Moon Shot Project. Susan was 50 when she noticed a small, pale, 1 mm mark on her left breast in 2012. She had no lump and both a mammogram and an ultrasound were reassuring. Six months later, the small mark had become redder and Susan had a biopsy that confirmed she had invasive lobular breast cancer. Susan's cancer had spread to her neck, the back of her head, the eye area and her ribs. She is now on her sixth line of treatment.

Dr Michaelis is a qualified air accident investigator. She focuses on how accidents can be prevented by learning from past mistakes, and has used these skills to look at how treatments have failed her. In doing so, she has identified the need for a new approach.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this really important debate. Does she agree that specific forms of cancer like lobular breast cancer require specific funding, research and treatment, and that a one-size-fits-all approach is going to fail millions of women? I declare an interest in asking this question in that last year I was diagnosed with lobular breast cancer. I am cancer-free now, thank God, as a result of the help of the Royal Marsden hospital. Tragically, that is not the case for many, many women in this country.

Helen Hayes: I thank the hon. Lady very much for that intervention and for sharing her personal story.

[Helen Hayes]

I pay tribute to Dr Michaelis for her research and campaigning on lobular cancer. I hope that all Members have received their Dr Susan Michaelis rose this week, named in her honour, and will plant it as a reminder of the urgency of her work.

There are so many other stories. Katie Swinburne was 47 when she was diagnosed with invasive lobular cancer in her left breast, leading to a double mastectomy, radiotherapy and 10 years of targeted chemotherapy. She writes:

“It is very hard to accept that none of my treatment is specific to lobular breast cancer and no one can tell me if it is working or has been effective...I find myself living in fear of recurrence. I deserved to have an early diagnosis. I did not get this. I deserve a specific treatment; I do not have this. I have three young children; they deserve to have a mum. I deserve effective follow up; I do not get this. I need you to change this for me, my husband, my family, all the women with a lobular diagnosis and all the women who will be diagnosed in the future.”

Emma Hunwick writes:

“I was a happy, healthy and relatively fit 49-year-old professional woman when I noticed a tiny pull in my right nipple. No lump, no other obvious external changes. An annual medical and referral just 12 days later resulted in a clear mammogram and a clear second 3D mammogram. An ultrasound then reported an area of 2 cm of concern. I rapidly went from ‘caught early’ to borderline stage 2 breast cancer. After my mastectomy I was informed that I was in fact stage 3c invasive lobular breast cancer...I am now at high risk with predicted survival outcomes at 10 and 15 years of approximately 45% and 30% respectively...I need to know that the vital scientific research into lobular breast cancer is being done now. Not next year or in 10 years but starting now, so that I might survive longer and continue to work with less worry about whether the standard monitoring tests that missed my first cancer, will miss a recurrence.”

Kirstin Spencer’s story is also typical. Diagnosed in 2018, she had a double mastectomy, but was warned that, especially in the first two years afterwards, the disease could recur in areas such as the scar tissue, chest wall and surrounding skin. She was told that vigilance and well-managed medical follow-up were everything. Within a year of her diagnosis, she developed red-flag symptoms that were repeatedly dismissed by her breast specialist. She was refused follow-up treatment and sent for psychological counselling. By the time that a new GP listened to her concerns, substantial recurrence was confirmed, with extensive metastatic disease.

My mother-in-law Cressida’s story is very different from Heather’s, and we are all so grateful to the doctors who treated her and for the subsequent 22 years of health that she has had and continues to enjoy. Cressida did not have any grandchildren when she was diagnosed, but a prompt diagnosis meant that she has been able to be closely involved in the lives of eight subsequent grandchildren, as a much-loved granny. But Cressida’s outcome was about luck rather than design, so much so that it was only very recently, when reviewing her medical notes, that she found out that the type of cancer she had was lobular.

Breast cancer survival rates are directly impacted by the stage of diagnosis. Late diagnosis, which is all too common for lobular breast cancer, leads to far worse outcomes. To improve this situation, we need much better awareness of the full range of breast cancer symptoms, including the very small skin changes that are typical of lobular cancer. Not all cancers cause lumps.

A clear mammogram does not provide absolute reassurance, because lobular cancer typically does not show on a mammogram. We need lobular-specific research and treatments.

Staff at Manchester Breast Centre have stated that they are able to do the research to understand the complete pathology of lobular breast cancer—research that has never been done—to pave the way for bespoke treatments to be developed. This will take five years and cost £20 million—moonshot funding that will be recouped many times over in the tax revenue paid by women like Heather, who would be able to continue working, and in the NHS costs that will be saved.

Hundreds of MPs in the last Parliament and this one have listened to the stories of constituents affected by lobular breast cancer and pledged their support for the Lobular Moon Shot Project. Lobular cancer is the sixth most common cancer in women. It is more common than ovarian, brain, central nervous system, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, pancreatic and kidney cancers. I know that the Minister cares deeply about women’s health equality and I put it to her that lobular cancer is a women’s health equality issue.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very important issue. I was diagnosed with, treated for and cured of breast cancer this year, in a very timely way. I was very grateful to be told that it was one of the best cancers to have, because there is so much research into it and treatment for it. It is unimaginable that someone could be treated for a different type of breast cancer for which the research and treatment are not available. I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that this situation needs to be addressed immediately, because we cannot have these inequalities. Lobular cancer should be on a par with other breast cancers in terms of treatment.

Helen Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She makes the point extremely well. How can it be that there are so few targeted programmes to improve the diagnosis and treatment of a cancer that affects 15% of breast cancer patients? How can it be that such poor information is provided to women that does not empower them to seek help when the symptoms of lobular cancer recur? How can it be that women are lured into a false sense of security when they receive a clear mammogram, or are fobbed off when they raise concerns?

We need to do better for women affected by lobular breast cancer, in memory of Heather and many more women like her who will not live to see their children grow up. We need to do better for women like Dr Susan Michaelis, who are living today with their lobular cancer being held just about at bay by generic breast cancer treatments, but who live with the constant anxiety that one day the treatment will stop working. We need to do better for the 22 women today and the 22 women tomorrow—the 22 women every single day—who are diagnosed with lobular cancer.

I have a number of asks to make of the Minister. Will she commit to investigate why there are so few targeted programmes to improve diagnosis, research and treatment of a cancer that affects 15% of breast cancer patients? Will she confirm that lobular cancer will remain a priority in the Government’s women’s health strategy?

Will she take steps to address the lack of information given to women about mammograms, so that every woman is reminded to remain vigilant for non-lump changes in their breasts, including very small changes? Will she take steps to improve the education of primary care doctors on the symptoms of lobular breast cancer, so that women are not provided with false reassurance, but promptly referred for diagnostic tests?

For patients treated for ductal breast cancer, the first five years are critical, but for lobular breast cancer the risk will remain for 10 years and sometimes beyond, yet lobular patients are typically released from surveillance care after only five years. Will the Minister take steps to ensure that there is a specific follow-up pathway for lobular breast cancer? Will she support Manchester Breast Centre's call for Lobular Moon Shot funding—£20 million over five years—to enable the basic pathology of lobular cancer to be fully understood as the foundation for developing bespoke treatments? Will she look at the fairness of the distribution of research funding to ensure that this funding can be identified without further delay?

I know the heartbreak that Heather's death has caused for all who knew and loved her, and most especially for her family. We can act to ensure that, in future, women like Heather who are diagnosed with lobular cancer can live to see their children grow up, and it is imperative that we do so.

2.46 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this debate, and for her very moving speech. I have to make a declaration of interest: I am a governor at the Royal Berkshire hospital in Reading and I have a family member who has shares in a medical company.

I would like to start by giving my sincerest thanks to Dr Susan Michaelis: first, for her rose, which I have to say I first thought was a delivery of parliamentary stationery to my office—but it was not; and for her passion and diligence in running the Lobular Moon Shot Project. I am proud to have pledged my support to the campaign, which will hopefully change the lives of millions. I will relentlessly champion the need for improving cancer research in this House, because cancer research is so important for securing earlier diagnosis and delivering more effective treatment. However, the existing system has numerous challenges that need to be overcome.

Funding is certainly one of the research barriers, but there are wider concerns that the existing pressures on our cancer and wider health service are acting as a barrier to research. The Government have committed to developing a national cancer plan. This could be a real turning point, because cancer services are simply not delivering for their patients. The Government are determining what the cancer plan will look like, and they are fortunate that Cancer Research UK has already produced a comprehensive report titled "Leading on Cancer", which sets out some of the key recommendations that they should consider on all matters of a cancer plan. I will highlight some of their points regarding research, which I suspect would significantly improve the chances of making the Lobular Moon Shot Project a reality.

Cancer Research UK makes it clear that the Government's cancer plan needs to cover workforce planning, and physical and digital infrastructure. That would give NHS services the capacity to carry out clinical research and would reverse the current trend whereby clinical research is seen as a "nice to have", rather than as something that is deeply integrated into cancer outcomes. Cancer Research UK's report also makes it clear that long-term planning is important in giving healthcare systems notice of innovations coming down the track so that the adoption and implementation of those new treatments can be planned for appropriately.

The Government will need to support staff with the right kind of training, and provide the right equipment to deliver innovations. They must not fall into the trap of talking only to themselves. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology needs to work as one to ensure that cancer research is given the priority it needs. The Cancer Research UK report addresses those points in far more detail. I urge the Minister to read it if she has not done so already, and I would be incredibly grateful if she would meet me and Cancer Research UK to discuss its findings.

I pay tribute to the cancer centre at my local hospital, the Royal Berkshire. The King Edward ward provides constituents with chemotherapy, and the Adelaide ward provides care for oncology patients. Its staff are among the very best in the NHS. Can the Government assure me that when they publish their plans for the rebuild of the Royal Berkshire hospital—following the new hospital building programme review, which I fear is already dragging on quite a bit—they will include appropriate digital and physical infrastructure to fully realise and implement new technologies in future years?

2.52 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this debate, and I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) about health outcomes for those diagnosed with cancer.

One of my most difficult days was when my wife was diagnosed with cancer. She has now thankfully recovered but, looking back at her cancer and her diagnosis, the fact that it was caught early and was seen as a cancer with greater success outcomes shows the disparity of outcomes—particularly for those with lobular breast cancer, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood described.

I pay tribute to the Lobular Moon Shot Project, which aims to give lobular cancer the attention and funding it needs, so that it can be better understood. Lobular breast cancer is the second most common form of breast cancer and, as has been said, accounts for about 15% of all breast cancers, yet there is still not enough research being undertaken.

My hon. Friend mentioned my constituent Emma, who is in the Public Gallery. Emma recently attended my constituency surgery and told me of her experiences with lobular breast cancer. Because of the way it presents, it was not picked up by a mammogram, and it took an MRI—facilitated through a routine private healthcare check—for it to be diagnosed. As has been said, it was initially thought to be a stage 2 cancer, but it was in fact

[Daniel Francis]

stage 3. Following her diagnosis, she underwent a double mastectomy, followed by chemotherapy for six months, and then 15 sessions of radiotherapy. In Emma's case, her cancer is likely to return, which leaves her with a very uncertain future for years ahead.

On the current data collection framework on lobular breast cancer, there is a lack of documented research about outcomes for and recurrences of lobular breast cancer. Indeed, there is currently just one trial available in the UK for lobular breast cancer patients. This leaves women like Emma unprepared for the potential impacts that the cancer will have on them further down the line. Given this position, I would be grateful if the Minister could address not only the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood in her asks, but her comments on what can be done to secure more regular MRIs—as was shown in Emma's case, having more regular MRIs is the only thing that will pick this up—and to ensure that there is greater data collection and transparency on the effects of lobular breast cancer.

2.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for her story on behalf of her dear friend and for leading the debate. We have been very privileged to hear contributions from courageous hon. Ladies to my right and to my left, who have told their own personal stories, which contribute to this debate. It probably also humbles us to have those contributions. Every person who has come here today to make a contribution will have an example of someone they love who has been affected.

Westminster Hall is a great place, as the Chamber would be, to raise awareness and to discuss these matters. I am sure that many will not be fully aware of this insidious brand of cancer, or of its specifics. I am personally grateful to be able to give one example, but also to discuss these issues.

As my party's health spokesperson, these issues are incredibly important to me. Indeed, they are important to us all; we are all here for the same purpose and it is vital for us all to be here. I know that we will all have had some journey experiencing cancer within our family or close to home. Not long ago, I met in my office a constituent of mine who was diagnosed with lobular breast cancer. I think that, whenever we meet someone who has come through that journey and thankfully is on the other side and alive today, we thank God, as the hon. Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) did. Ultimately—I say this respectfully to everyone here—that is where the power lies for healing: with our God.

The hon. Lady explained that there is not enough research into the specifics of this cancer, let alone more access to medication that lessens the impacts of the suffering. Perhaps the Minister will have an opportunity, through civil servants, to check what research and development there is on this specific lobular cancer to help save more lives, make lives better and give people hope for the future. Ultimately, in this House, we are tasked to give hope—not because of our words, because our words are not important—to those out there who face this reality of what the future will hold for them.

Invasive lobular breast cancer is the second most common type of breast cancer. It is also known as invasive lobular carcinoma. Around 15 in every 100 breast cancers are invasive lobular breast cancer. The most recent figures show that, in 2016, 6,765 people were diagnosed with lobular breast cancer in England, including 6,754 women and 11 men. There may be those who think that it is not a disease that can affect men; but although it is a very low number, it still does. My hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) is one of those survivors. I think we should thank God that he is here today as well. It is important to note that, although it is less common for men to get this form of cancer, they are still able to get it and it can impact them just the same.

There were 7,566 cases of female breast cancer diagnosed during 2018 and 2022 in Northern Ireland. On average, there were 1,513 cases per year. I want to put the figures and stats on record because they illustrate clearly how critical, dangerous and invasive this cancer can be. In Northern Ireland, the breast cancer incidence rate was 156.7 cases per 100,000 females. The odds of developing female breast cancer before the age of 85 was one in eight. It is clear that there is a major concern in Northern Ireland and throughout this great United Kingdom.

This specific type of cancer often goes undetected, as it spreads in straight lines, as opposed to lumps. Furthermore, although the cancer grows slowly compared with other cancers, the tumours can be large by the time they are detected. In addition, some 3.75 million people will be diagnosed with this cancer in the next 10 years, which is why it is important to discuss it, so I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood for securing this debate.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I associate myself with what we have heard in this very powerful debate. I commend the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), and I commend the family who are sitting in the Gallery. Cancer is a thief in many homes, and I commend them for their bravery.

Does my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) agree that, across the UK, we need more investment, more research and more clinical trials, and that it is for this Government to step into the breach and do just that?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is right. We are fortunate that Labour has set aside £26.3 billion for the NHS. We have to recognise that commitment, and I hope the Minister will be able to tell us that money will be set aside for the very invasive disease to which my hon. Friend refers.

ILC currently has no specific treatment and, for those who have been diagnosed, it behaves very differently from the more common type of breast cancer. As we look ahead to the next 10 years, it has been great to learn more about the Lobular Moon Shot Project, which has been supported by this Government, the last Government and hundreds of Members. Everyone in this room supports it, everyone in the Gallery supports it, and everyone outside this room supports it too.

The project was set up in 2023, which is fairly recent. At my age, the years go incredibly fast, but 2023 feels like yesterday. The project seeks to lobby the Government to secure the research funding needed to understand the biology of lobular breast cancer. The project has stated

that a major research package is estimated to cost some £20 million over five years, but it has not been prioritised as it should have been. I reiterate what the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said, and I ask that the research is prioritised. The Minister may not be able to tell us about everything that is happening, but we need to hear that commitment.

Some fantastic charities undertake amazing work to support those living with breast cancer, and I have met them both in Westminster and at home in my office, and their work is instrumental in helping people to cope with the physical, mental and emotional side of dealing with a cancer diagnosis. One person will have the cancer, but their family and friends are also affected, as the hon. Lady said.

With this type of cancer, there is a risk of recurrence or spread. Up to 30% of early-stage primary patients will experience spread to their organs, which can be a number of years after the initial diagnosis. This highlights again the need for greater research and funding to ensure early detection and to prevent the cancer's spread.

The shadow Minister spoke in a debate this morning about research undertaken between Birmingham University, Newcastle University and Queen's University Belfast. He was talking about rare autoimmune rheumatic diseases, but Queen's University Belfast has partnerships with other organisations to try to find cures for cancer. Many universities across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are carrying out research, and the Government's approach to that is vital.

I have gone on a bit longer than I had hoped, but there is more work to be done on researching most cancers. Breast cancer, and specifically lobular breast cancer, impacts the lives of thousands of people every year. It is time to do more as a collective. Today, collectively, Members on both sides of the Chamber are committed to trying to find a cure and trying to find hope for those who have cancer, and who will hopefully survive it, and for their families as well, by undertaking the important research into this awful disease. We are also committed to making men and women across the country aware of the warning signs.

I look to the Minister and her Labour Government, which is my Government—whether you are a Labour person or not, it is our Government and they are trying to do the best they can, and I think they deserve support for their commitment to do so—with sincerity and honesty, perhaps beseechingly, to ensure that the devolved nations are not left behind in terms of a strategy. I look forward to action from the Minister and to her replying to all the requests.

3.5 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for raising this vital issue. Breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer death for women worldwide, and many, if not all, Members will know somebody who has faced the frightening prospect of breast cancer treatment, which is unfortunately all too common and impacts the lives of millions, whether directly or indirectly. What is fortunate is the progress in detection and treatment, which has provided many patients with positive outlooks and a healthy future life with their loved ones.

Sadly, this prospect is often not afforded to the 15% of breast cancer sufferers diagnosed with invasive lobular cancer. Survival prospects for those with ILC can be relatively good, but only for those who are diagnosed early, before the cancer has spread. I repeat the calls of other Members and Breast Cancer Now to publish the findings of the UK national cancer screening review into breast cancer risk stratification. If improvements are made so that we can detect more elusive forms of breast cancer, tens of thousands of lives could be saved. However, improved detection is not enough by itself. Women diagnosed with ILC face another issue: the treatments they are provided are not tailored or specific to their cancer. In short, they are treated for a disease they do not have.

One of those women, as has been mentioned, is Dr Susan Michaelis, who lives in my constituency of Horsham, where I met her earlier this year. Susan is an incredible woman who has campaigned tirelessly on invasive lobular cancer treatment and research. She was diagnosed with lobular cancer in 2013, but the treatment she then received was designed for ductal cancer, which is the most common form of breast cancer. As a result, Susan's condition evolved and became resistant to the treatments now available.

Someone less determined might have given up looking for answers, but instead Susan went out and started the Lobular Moon Shot Project and, yes, I have already planted my Susan Michaelis rose. She met research experts to build an idea of the cost of research into the basic biology of invasive lobular cancer in the hope of improving outcomes for those yet to be diagnosed. The Institute of Cancer Research has deemed that £20 million is enough to make significant progress, and Rob Clarke of the Manchester Breast Centre will head up that work in conjunction with world leading experts. That is all agreed.

Since then, Susan and the Lobular Moon Shot Project have lobbied MPs and Government Departments. Hundreds of MPs have supported the application for funding. In the last Parliament, the number was 247; there have already been almost 200 in the current term, and I am sure that many more will join the call. The team at the project should be commended for all their hard work and amazing, ceaseless energy.

Given the Government's recent announcements about taking a firm business approach to funding within Departments, research into lobular cancer makes for a strong business case as well. Breast Cancer Now research shows that the cost of breast cancer to the UK economy is £2.6 billion. That is set to rise to £3.6 billion by 2034. Ongoing cancer treatment is expensive, with each patient requiring approximately £10,000 a year, whereas the £20 million research request equates to £240 per lobular cancer patient over the next 10 years.

Early detection and better treatment can reduce the overall time the NHS needs to support patients. Put simply, research into lobular cancer saves both lives and money. If the human arguments are not enough for the Government to commit to this vital research, then let us talk about the money. The previous Government included lobular cancer research in their women's health strategy for England 2024 and acknowledged that there was an urgent, unmet clinical need. I ask the new Secretary of State to renew that commitment and to fund the

[John Milne]

Lobular Moon Shot Project's call for research, which will enable the NHS to offer specific treatment to lobular cancer patients and end the one-size-fits-all approach. Dr Susan Michaelis and the lobular ladies hope that they will be the last generation to go through the experience of insufficient treatment and poor outcomes, and I hope that this Government can make that a reality.

3.10 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for bringing this really important debate to the Chamber and for her excellent speech, which told the story of her friend Heather and the stories of Katy, Emma, Kirstin and Cressida, who have suffered a pernicious type of disease that we are currently unable to treat effectively 100% of the time.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (John Milne) for their speeches, which were all excellent. I also thank the hon. Members for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) and for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for sharing their own stories, which were very helpful to the discussion. I thank Dr Susan Michaelis for the bare-root rose—when we received it in the MPs' offices, we were all a bit stumped by what the enormous box might be for—and, more importantly, for her tireless campaigning to secure funding for research into lobular breast cancer.

The speeches today have been excellent and detailed, and I wish to avoid repetition. As we have heard, 22 people a day in the UK—mostly women—and 1,000 women globally are diagnosed with invasive lobular breast cancer. It is the second most common type of breast cancer, so it is really important that we support the Lobular Moon Shot Project. Liberal Democrats will fully support that project, which is run with the Manchester Breast Centre. Some £20 million over five years to better understand the diagnosis and treatment of this disease is not really a significant investment for the Government, but it would have an enormous and meaningful impact for those people—mostly women, but, as I said, there are some men—who are affected by it every single day.

Research funding is such an important part of investment in the early detection and treatment of cancer—particularly for lobular breast cancer—which is better for everyone, including the patients who have been diagnosed. Receiving a diagnosis of any type of cancer is a really difficult moment for any individual and their family, but receiving a diagnosis of a cancer for which there is not a clear treatment pathway is even more concerning. It is really important that we try to address the problem that these women face. It is better for them and for the NHS, because, as we all know, early treatment tends to be more successful and quicker. Because of that, it is also better for the taxpayer. It is entirely consistent with the recently announced Government strategy of rewiring the NHS to focus resources on early prevention, detection and treatment to ensure that people are kept healthy, rather than treated when they are sick.

As other speakers have pointed out, this disease is the sixth most common cancer in women, and it needs to be treated as a distinct disease. We must ensure that women who face this diagnosis are given the treatment for the disease that they have, not for one that they do not have. It is really important that that is built into the Government's new cancer strategy, which they have committed to work on. The last Government did not have a 10-year cancer plan, although they did include lobular breast cancer in their women's health strategy, so I was really pleased to see that in a debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham, this Government committed to a national cancer strategy. That is a really important step forward, and we are really pleased that the Government felt able to make that step. I hope that for people who have been diagnosed with lobular breast cancer and, indeed, any other type of cancer that the Government are able to deliver on the strategy as soon as possible.

One of my key concerns is the dreadful waiting times for scans and for results from MRI scans, which are the best way of detecting lobular breast cancer, and other types of CT scan. In my constituency of North Shropshire, which is part of the Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin integrated care board, we have some of the worst records in the country for scan interpretation. As a result, I have been contacted by constituents who have had devastating outcomes, where scan results have been delivered to them, only for them to find out that they have been on the wrong type of treatment in the meantime, sometimes for many months. We need to avoid that happening in the future. The leadership team has shown that it can address the problem, and I am pleased to report that it is beginning to do so in Shropshire.

I hope that the cancer strategy will identify where there are shortages of radiologists and of the machinery needed to carry out those scans and to ensure that we hit the 62-day waiting-time target for people who need to start urgent cancer treatment. Part of the capital expenditure plan announced by the Government is critical to that, and I look forward to hearing the details from the Minister.

The Liberal Democrats also want the Government to pass a cancer survival research Act that requires the Government to co-ordinate and ensure funding for less survivable and less common types of cancer, and for types of cancer that are not currently treated as distinct or treated appropriately. We want the time it takes for new treatments to reach patients to be halved, which would mean expanding the capacity of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. That would ensure that patients with cancers that do not respond to current standard treatments can access new treatments much more quickly as they come online.

I echo the request of the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood and the other hon. Members who have spoken so powerfully today. The Lobular Moon Shot Project would change the lives of 8,500 women in the UK every year. In developing the national cancer strategy, I hope the Minister will consider some of the proposals that we have put forward collectively today, which are aimed at improving detection, treatment and survival rates for people with invasive lobular cancer and all other types of cancer.

3.16 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure and an honour to serve under your stewardship, Ms Vaz, and even more of an honour to be part of this debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). Not only was her speech emotional, but it was powerful. Cressida, I am sure, is incredibly proud and Heather would be even more proud. That is because the hon. Lady has really done the subject justice today, not only by securing this debate but by bringing the whole room together and highlighting the most salient points. Often in these debates, there is a lot to cover, and the hon. Lady has done it with aplomb.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and Malling (Helen Grant) and the hon. Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) for speaking up about their personal experiences. That is tough to do, and it is a testament to their constituents that they have put on record, in public, the trials and tribulations they have been through. It is important that people feel they can advocate in this space and lead by example in doing so.

That leads me on to the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis), who talked about his wife. He is an example of how important it is to have a powerful advocate. Partners and families do exactly that: they advocate for patients who are going through treatment. The fact that he is doing that here as well is incredibly powerful.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and I are starting to have regular conversations about health in Westminster Hall debates, with an hour and a half this morning and another hour and a half this afternoon. His passion for health topics is probably only superseded by the volumes of *Hansard* content he accounts for. He talked about networks, and in research it is important to make sure that we are bringing together the best brains from across the field for the biggest possible research pools. That is much needed.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) on highlighting hope. The danger is that we spend too much time talking about difficulties, when over the past couple of decades, breast cancer actually provides a good story of how far advances have been made and survival rates improved. It is important that we point that out, so that not all is doom and gloom. There are fantastic survival rates for breast cancer, for example.

The hon. Gentleman paid tribute to Dr Susan Michaelis, as did the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones). As MPs, we are lobbied a lot, so to have got so many MPs signed up and to have secured debates here repeatedly, month on month and year on year, is an incredible testament to the character of Dr Michaelis.

The Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), rightly highlighted access. When it comes to making sure we get diagnoses, access is key. The last Government rolled out community diagnostic centres—almost 170 of them. When it comes to diseases such as breast cancer, I hope that new MRI and CT scanners will become available, allowing us to have better screening pathways, because that is what often limits a screening programme. That access is now being widened so dramatically, with the Government

confirming this morning that they are continuing with it, is a sign of great cross-party working, which we all know the NHS needs.

Much has been said about lobular breast cancer in this debate, and for me it matters because of the way it presents. One can take the doctor out of medicine but not the medicine out of the doctor, so I will use this opportunity to ensure that people are aware that they should regularly check their breasts. They should look for lumps but also for skin changes, or what we call *peau d'orange*—it looks a little like orange peel—on the breast. They should also look for slight changes, a little bit of discharge or blood. Lumps, bumps and discharge do not mean an individual has cancer; it simply means they need to be assessed.

One of the great things about the set-up in this country is that it is quick and accessible—a good success story—but we need to ensure that people feel comfortable and able to come forward. Cases have been highlighted where clinicians did not seem to trust women. It is important that clinicians trust women's instincts. Women know their own breasts, and when they are aware of changes, they must be taken seriously. We have a chance through clinical pathways to do that, which is important.

We heard that 22 women a day in the UK are diagnosed with lobular breast cancer. As someone who has given that diagnosis, my next piece of advice for anyone unfortunate enough to receive a diagnosis of breast cancer is to ask whether it is lobular or ductal. That is often forgotten. As a clinician, I have never been asked that question, but it would help to change the narrative of expectations about what treatments may be available, and promote understanding. If a patient speaks to someone else with breast cancer, they might wonder why their treatment is different. It is important to educate people, not in a condescending way, but to appreciate the general difference. Treatments are becoming so specialised and nuanced that all will not be the same, and that can be quite disconcerting.

I pay tribute to those who are battling lobular cancer, the cancer survivors and the campaigners from Lobular Breast Cancer UK for their tireless work in raising the issue. Of course, the ultimate goal is to have a cure for lobular breast cancer. Advances in medical research and treatment options are moving us closer to that goal. In 2022, the Government invested £29 million into the Institute for Cancer Research and the Royal Marsden biomedical research centre to support research into cancer, including lobular breast cancer. That included a £1.3 million project to determine whether abbreviated forms of breast MRI can detect breast cancers missed in screening. That links to the point about having more MRI scanners, which might well enable better research to determine the way to pick these things up and improve the ability to deliver.

I am pleased the previous Government supported, through the National Institute for Health and Care Research clinical research network, 10 further lobular breast cancer-related studies. I am also reassured by the Lobular Moon Shot Project, which we have heard a lot about. I pay tribute to the former Member for Horsham, Sir Jeremy Quin, who did a lot to raise that issue. I am pleased to see the new hon. Member for Horsham standing in his shoes to raise it now. It would be useful to know if the £20 million for the five-year study is being looked at by the Government. It was raised several times with the

[Dr Luke Evans]

previous Government, but an election got in the way and power changed hands. It would be interesting to see if the proposals have been reviewed and merit the Government taking them forward.

A key measure that has been missed to some extent is guidelines. Lobular Breast Cancer UK is to launch a campaign calling for national breast cancer guidelines to be updated to recognise lobular breast cancer. Will the Minister commit to reviewing and updating the guidelines with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence? We have also heard about devolved powers. Scotland, for instance, has the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network. It would be useful to know whether the Minister will raise this issue with the devolved nations to ensure we have a joined-up approach, without any cross-boundary difficulties.

I do not want to turn this into a political battle because this is not the place, but I put it gently to the Minister that we have heard about the need for support, a lot of which comes from charities. The changes in national insurance contributions for employers have hit charities, including the likes of Breast Cancer Now, Macmillan and Marie Curie. They are not shielded from the rises. I will be grateful if the Minister considers raising with Treasury what can be done to help support those crucial nurses, advice lines and workers, so as to make sure that when people are going through these difficulties—we have heard how complex the scene can be, particularly in breast cancer—advice is accessible to all.

I thank all those who took part in this debate, and I remind people to regularly examine their breasts. If there is a change, seek help. If a diagnosis of cancer is given, ask if it is lobular or ductal. Finally, remember that no one is alone. As we have heard today, many people suffer from cancer and there is support out there—from the NHS, charities, family and friends—so do not be fearful. Speak out and get that support.

3.25 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I add my thanks to all hon. Members for their contributions and to my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). First let me say how sorry I am to hear about her friend. Those are very precious friendships and I think my hon. Friend articulated that well today. My deepest sympathies to Heather's loved ones who are with us today and to her wider family group. It is a really difficult time and this is a very recent bereavement to be talking about. My hon. Friend has used her voice as a parliamentarian to good effect, as she always does, and I congratulate her on doing that. I hope I can go some way to answering the questions she raised at the end of her speech. If I do not and she is not satisfied, I will make sure officials get back to her on the specifics.

I also echo the words of the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) about hon. Members raising their personal experiences and the importance of support from partners and wider family members for people who are going through diagnosis, treatment and sadly, often, death.

We know that too many cancer patients are being failed. They are waiting too long for life-saving treatments and receiving a diagnosis too late. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister reiterated last week, we have inherited a broken NHS but it is not beyond repair. We know it needs to be fixed and there is not a single solution. To ensure that more people survive cancer, including lobular breast cancer, we have to take a multi-pronged approach—catching it earlier so more treatments are available, raising awareness of its specific symptoms, and investing in equipment and research, as many hon. Members have raised today. All those actions are part of our plan to put the NHS on the road to recovery.

As we have heard today, according to Cancer Research UK lobular breast cancer is the second most common type of breast cancer. Also known as lobular carcinoma, it impacts the lives of many—around 15 in every 100 breast cancers are invasive lobular. Treatments for lobular breast cancer are broadly similar to those for other breast cancers. Surgery and radiotherapy are effective for most patients with primary invasive types, meaning those which have not spread to other parts of the body. Systemic therapy such as chemotherapy, hormonal treatment, targeted therapy or immunotherapy are usually offered based on the stage at which the NHS catches that cancer.

Another factor which can determine clinicians' decisions on the best treatment option is how the cancer has spread or developed in each patient's case and we understand that is different for different patients. Sadly my understanding is that when cancer is growing in more than one location, as is more common in lobular breast cancer, treatment is more challenging. The same is true when a cancer has spread to other parts of the body. To improve outcomes in such challenging cases, NHS England funded an audit into both primary and metastatic breast cancer that has spread. The scoping for this audit began in October 2022 and the results were published in September this year. NHS England are hopeful that the results will help to improve the consistency of treatments offered, as well as stimulate improvements.

We know that for far too many women, lobular breast cancer is diagnosed at a later stage, which means that treatment options are more limited. The key to improving survival must lie in raising awareness, and early detection and diagnosis. I am not sure I can do it as well as the shadow Minister, but I want to use this opportunity to raise awareness of the fact that not all breast cancers form a firm lump. I think he articulated really well what women should be looking for. Lobular breast cancer patients are more likely to have thickened areas of breast tissue. Possible symptoms include an area of swelling, a change in the nipple or a change in the skin, such as dimpling. I encourage everyone to check their breasts regularly and to consult their GP straightaway if they have any concerns. While more people are surviving breast cancer than ever before, we know that lobular breast cancers can be particularly hard to detect.

Another measure to support earlier diagnosis of breast cancer is screening before people notice symptoms. Our screening programme sends women their first invitation at the age of 50. To support detection, the NHS carries out approximately 2.1 million breast cancer screens each year in hospitals and mobile screening vans, usually

in convenient community locations, but—this is a really shocking figure that I learned recently in another debate in Westminster Hall, which shows how important it is that Members raise these issues—take-up of breast cancer screening is currently below 70%. That is worryingly low, and we are determined to improve it. Every effort that hon. Members here and people listening to this debate can make to improve that take-up rate will help save lives. If someone is eligible for screening, they should come forward and take up that important offer.

Unfortunately, even for those women who come forward for a mammogram, we know that lobular breast cancer can be more difficult to catch than other types of breast cancer. We have heard some shocking stories and examples today. To ensure that women survive, we need to be relentless in researching every possible avenue of treatment and diagnosis. Examples of innovation supported by my Department include £1.3 million invested in a Bristol-based FAST MRI project, which will determine whether different types of scans can help detect cancer in a cost-effective manner. The FAST MRI project focuses on an abbreviated MRI, which is a shortened version of a breast MRI. This type of imaging can help to detect the most aggressive forms of breast cancer sometimes missed by screening through mammography, including lobular breast cancer.

My Department is also working closely with UK Research and Innovation and the Medical Research Council. These bodies are responsible for studies that look to understand the basic mechanisms of disease. Combined, they spend £125 million on cancer research each year. My officials also meet regularly with partners to discuss a wide range of our research investments and ways to stimulate new proposals. These include those for lobular breast cancers.

Through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, my Department will continue to encourage and welcome applications for new research in this area. I hope this addresses the shadow Minister's point, but funds for research are still available through the NIHR. Funds are awarded through open competition informed by expert peer review, with active involvement of patients and the public. The Department and NIHR also advise the campaign on the Lobular Moon Shot Project. It has already contracted £29 million, which I think is the figure the shadow Minister referred to, to the Institute of Cancer Research and its partner at the Royal Marsden. This proposal included work on lobular breast cancer. I hope I have addressed that point, but if I have not, then please let me know.

We know that we must do more to rise to the growing challenge that cancers including lobular breast cancer represent, but for our efforts in detecting and understanding this complicated disease to be effective, we need to back fundamental reform in the health service. That is why we have launched the biggest national conversation about the future of the NHS since its birth to shape the 10-year plan. We need suggestions from hon. Members on how to go further in preventing cancer where we can. I urge everyone to visit the website change.nhs.uk to do so.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The risk of all breast cancers in women is reduced by 4.3% for every 12 months of breastfeeding, but the UK has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the western world: only 1%

of children are still exclusively breastfed at six months. Does the Minister agree that community initiatives to encourage women to breastfeed for longer support the Government's mission to reduce the risk of breast cancers and improve health outcomes overall?

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Lady for that really important point. She highlights another important issue affecting the health of women and children, and I agree with her.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood spoke about women's health overall, which is an important priority for this Government, as are these forms of cancer and the wider preventive agenda. That is another point that can be made on the change.nhs.uk website, which I will keep plugging. The issues that have been raised on it by the public and staff are really interesting and informative.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been clear that there should be a national cancer plan. The hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) made helpful points about that opportunity. I will not take up his invitation for a meeting; his point would be better made by being inputted into the process with the organisations he is in touch with. That would help to shape the national cancer plan, which we can all buy into as a country. The plan will include more details about how to improve outcomes for all tumour types, including lobular breast cancer, and ensure that patients have access to the latest treatments and technology. We are now in discussions about what form that plan should take and what its relationship with the 10-year health plan and the Government's wider health missions should be. We will provide updates on that in due course.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood for bringing this important matter to the House.

Dr Evans: I want to draw the Minister's attention to the point about guidelines. Will she consider speaking to the devolved nations and, in England, to NICE, about guidance on lobular breast cancer?

Karin Smyth: I was going to come to that. I am not fully au fait with the change in guidelines that the hon. Gentleman referred to, so I will happily take that point away. He made a wider point about aligning across the devolved regions. Obviously, some of these issues are devolved and we have to respect the devolution arrangements. On the wider research, we should learn from each other, understanding that we have similar patient cohorts. There is lots of good medical work going on, and the Government are determined to work respectfully across the devolved nations. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a written answer on the specifics of his question.

Heartbreaking stories such as Heather's remind us that diseases such as lobular breast cancer are complex. They are hard to catch, and therefore treat. Such tragic losses are a wake-up call for us all, and I commend all hon. Members for raising those stories. For people listening in, as well as those who have attended the debate, they are an important way to raise awareness. We are grateful to those who have shared their personal stories, which help us get the NHS back on its feet so that we can better serve the people who need it.

[Karin Smyth]

Improving cancer survival requires a multi-pronged approach to ensure that patients have timely access to effective treatments, built on the foundations of world-class research. We have already taken immediate steps to allow cancer patients to benefit from the most up-to-date technology. Through the recent Budget, we committed to surgical hubs and scanners to allow for 30,000 more procedures each year, and we are increasing capacity for tests. We have also committed another £70 million for radiotherapy machines. Lots of hon. Members have raised those points. I have outlined several measures today, and I assure Members that improving outcomes for cancer patients, including those with lobular breast cancer, remains a top priority for this Government.

3.39 pm

Helen Hayes: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed. They have brought their constituents' stories and their own personal experiences to the debate. We have many issues to work on in this House, but there is a particular responsibility when an issue presents itself in a personal way through a devastating story, whether that is through a constituent, somebody we know or our own personal experience. When we see an opportunity for things to be done, it is imperative for us all to bring that to this place. I am grateful to hon. Members for the spirit in which the debate has been conducted, the high level of consensus and the high level of commitment to see change for patients with lobular cancer.

I am grateful to the Minister for her engagement with the debate. I know she is committed to this area. In closing, I ask that she looks in further detail at two issues. The first is the proportional allocation of the funding available through the NIHR for research into breast cancer. We have heard again and again today that

lobular cancer accounts for 15% of all breast cancers, yet currently attracts only a tiny fraction of dedicated research. We know that the improvements we have seen in treatments and outcomes for different types of cancer diagnosis always hinge on the investment put into research to find the cures. There is a disproportionality there that can and must be changed.

The second area I ask the Minister to look at in a little more detail is the advice and guidance given to clinicians in primary care, to make sure that there is a consistent understanding of the symptoms of lobular cancer and its distinctiveness as a disease compared with ductal cancer, and to make sure that every woman presenting to her GP is able to access accurate advice and swift onward referral. It is important across the whole range of women's health conditions that women are trusted and listened to when they present with symptoms to their GP, and this is an area where I believe primary care can do better, be more consistent and deliver better outcomes as a consequence.

I pay tribute once again to Dr Susan Michaelis and all those who campaign on this issue on the basis of their deeply difficult personal experiences. I give my commitment that for as long as I have a voice in this place, I will continue to work on this issue until we see the changes that are needed.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I thank everyone who took part in and attended this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the treatment of lobular breast cancer.

3.43 pm

Sitting suspended.

Telegraph Poles: Birmingham

4.23 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered telegraph poles in Birmingham.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and I welcome the Minister to his place. I want to thank him, as I know he has been working extremely hard on the issue by meeting MPs and working with the industry and regulators. The installation of telegraph poles is an issue that has been landing in the inboxes of MPs across the House and from across the country. In view of that, I hope he does not mind my summoning him to Westminster Hall to take more questions.

I pay tribute to the many constituents I have worked with on the issue over the past two years, including the residents of Vernon Road, Montague Road in Edgbaston, Chad Road, Clarendon Road, Gravel Bank in Bartley Green, and Perrott's Folly near the Waterworks tower. In particular, I pay tribute to the campaigning of my constituent Lizzy Jordan, who has left no stone unturned in trying to engage with the provider, Brsk, about which I will say more in a moment. Lizzy and our local residents have been a powerhouse. Last year, we managed to convince Brsk to move a pole in front of Perrott's Folly and the Waterworks tower. This has a huge significance to our heritage, as the towers inspired JRR Tolkien in "The Lord of the Rings".

We have been pushing Brsk to do right by the residents in our area, but it is exhausting work. Over the past two years, I have engaged with, sent numerous emails to and met Brsk's west midlands representatives. I joined a resident-led protest against Brsk installing poles outside Perrott's Folly in my North Edgbaston ward. I have convened and attended a meeting between residents and Brsk about Vernon Road, Clarendon Road and Montague Road. I have written to the last Government and this on several occasions, and submitted evidence ahead of MPs' roundtables on the issue. I have raised my concerns with Ofcom through letters, and I continue to support my constituents with casework. I think we all agree that it should not take a well-organised community campaign and an active local MP to get a provider to meet its statutory duties, and that is why I have called today's debate.

I want to say that I and the vast majority of my constituents support the roll-out of new broadband infrastructure. The importance of improving broadband speeds and access to the internet should not be underestimated. Nearly all aspects of our everyday lives—education, work, communication, entertainment—are made possible by the continuous expansion and upgrading of telecoms networks. There are significant digital dark spots in my constituency, such as in North Edgbaston and parts of Harborne, Quinton, Edgbaston and Bartley Green especially. In several areas, superfast broadband coverage is among the worst 10% of areas in the UK. According to recently published House of Commons Library data, 3.8% of lines across my constituency do not even have 10 megabits per second download speeds, with notable clusters of poor coverage in the most deprived areas, such as Bartley Green, and I have asked Brsk to focus on that area.

I am not quick to forget how damaging the pandemic was for many of our children. Particularly in deprived areas with poor connections, we were unable to access remote learning. I and the vast majority of my constituents understand that the roll-out will provide a boost to our economy and set Britain up for the rest of this digital century. This infrastructure will provide opportunities and lower prices, and it can improve people's lives, but there are ways of going about it. First, we should focus on areas that do not have coverage, not those that do.

As the Minister has himself acknowledged, while the majority of providers are trying to do right by local people by making efforts to consult and not put up poles, some providers in my constituency such as Brsk have occasionally behaved like cowboys by not using existing infrastructure, failing to consult residents with the adequate 28 days' notice, failing to observe the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 requirements to ensure that pathways are clear and accessible until they are told to do so, failing to secure the right council permits for works, and putting up poles everywhere as the only means to address coverage. Given that Brsk's business is communications, it is ironic how poor it has been at communicating with its stakeholders. The crux of the issue is that such companies are not exploring alternatives to poles or using existing infrastructure when they can. To give some of many examples—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 15 minutes.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.40 pm

On resuming—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. The debate may now continue until 5.08 pm.

Preet Kaur Gill: The crux of the issue is that these companies are not exploring alternatives to poles or using existing infrastructure when they can. I will give some of many examples. Freedom of information requests to our local council revealed that Brsk did not need to put up poles on Clarendon Road in my constituency, because it could have utilised existing ducts—but it did so anyway, ignoring that fact. Vernon Road is another example; BT installed full-fibre to St Paul's school for girls at that location without any requirement for poles, yet a constituent came to my surgery on Friday to tell me that another pole had gone up, with a notice on the council's planning portal appearing only after the pole had been erected. That is even after the Minister's meeting with Brsk.

I have met Brsk and exchanged exhaustive correspondence on these issues. What has struck me in my dealings with the firm is the lack of policy or strategy for work in my constituency. Poles are supposed to be a last resort, but even where they are not needed, like on Vernon Road, several go up anyway. There are now four on that road. Frequently, when issues are raised, they are not listened to. I asked Brsk for a map of where it is planning to roll out poles in my constituency, and it could not give me one. There is either a plan that it will not share or there really is no strategic focus on where the infrastructure is needed.

[Preet Kaur Gill]

My constituents have had similar experiences. An elderly constituent wrote to me earlier this year, deeply worried that a Brsk telegraph pole on an adjoining road, installed less than a metre from her back garden fence, was so close that it could easily provide burglars with access to her property. She told me she lives in perpetual fear that her house could be broken into. More importantly, that was avoidable. Had Brsk simply made an effort to engage first with residents about changes in their community, she would not have been left in that situation.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for allowing me to intervene. She makes a powerful point on behalf of her constituents. In my constituency, we have a similar situation in Stourport-on-Severn, where firms are using permitted development rights in areas where residents are not even allowed to put up a garden fence because of planning approvals. Does she agree that it is a cynical attempt by many of these providers to build an infrastructure that provides capital value that can be sold on? That is less to do with delivering full-fibre broadband than with making money in the short term for those operators.

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank the hon. Member for that important point about the business model. There are alternative ways to implement the infrastructure. In areas like his, this activity does not respect the environment, heritage or planning laws, and we end up with poles erected. Some of them do not even have any lines going through them, which just goes to show that the existing infrastructure meant there was no need for that, but, as he says, it is clearly quite a lucrative business model to sell on the new infrastructure.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way. We had similar issues with Brsk when it went on to an unadopted road in a conservation area and started erecting poles. My constituents, Dr Carole McKeown—the secretary for Reddings and Amesbury Road residents association—and her neighbour came to see me. Following the intervention of the Minister, Brsk has agreed to remove the poles, but the point remains that the consultation with and notification of the residents did not happen. These are not isolated incidents. Does my hon. Friend agree that there needs to be tougher action against companies that go about their business without any adherence to the code of conduct?

Preet Kaur Gill: I know that the Minister, in summing up, will address that point, because he has been proactive in meeting the regulator and the companies tasked with installing this infrastructure. He has already given them a clear indication of where the Government will go next if they do not adhere to the code. I also know that he has met Brsk since the previous debate on the issue; I thank him for that.

I was interested to read confirmation that Brsk now has guaranteed access to BT Openreach infrastructure to install broadband lines underground, so why is it not doing so? It is not its business model—that is why it is not doing it. I would be interested to learn from the Minister when that was agreed, because Brsk has not been taking advantage of that in my constituency to date.

Some providers are much better at this. I want to ensure that not everybody is painted with the same brush. There are some very good providers. Last year, broadband infrastructure carried out by Pipeline Utilities on behalf of Grain Connect left Willow Avenue in my constituency with some dreadful retarmacking, as well as broken and cracked paving slabs. When I wrote to the organisation about this, it confirmed that the site was inspected, and agreed to replace and relay the broken paving slabs and tarmac. That is exactly how we should be proceeding.

My experience with Brsk has been very different. Repeatedly, it will arrive in an area to erect new broadband infrastructure poles without properly consulting residents or me. We have seen that behaviour on Vernon Road, Clarendon Road, Chad Road and Stirling Road. The company's idea of consultation appears to be to put up a notice stating its intention to put up another pole—in some cases, with little to no consultation period. Sometimes, I am told, a notice has not gone up at all, despite my best efforts and those of my constituents to raise concerns about the siting of the poles. We have been ignored. This means that the infrastructure ends up causing issues that could have been foreseen or avoided if there were proper consultation.

Poles have been erected in the middle of pavements, obstructing prams, wheelchairs and people with mobility issues. There have been attempts to erect unsightly poles in front of listed buildings, instead of exploring other options. Some roads are being peppered with poles, even when we are told they are a last resort. It is time for stronger action. Clearly, Brsk is not heeding Government advice.

As we all know, since the rules were changed by the previous Government in 2016, there is no requirement for planning permission for poles up to 15 metres in height, and there is no legal requirement for consultation with local residents and businesses. Good practice asks telecoms communications operators to notify the council of their intention to install a pole, as well as to advertise their development proposal within the vicinity of the site, usually via a site notice, but in reality there is no real opportunity to object to an installation. There needs to be a strategy that targets areas of need and uses existing infrastructure.

We are all familiar with the fact that the Electronic Communications Code (Conditions and Restrictions) Regulations 2003 require that, among other things, operators must share apparatus where possible, and use underground rather than overground lines where they can—yet that is not happening in practice. I know roads where as many as five or six poles have been erected. It is ugly, disruptive and excessive, and it impacts on house prices.

As these issues are a matter for the regulator, Ofcom, I seek the Minister's clarification on what monitoring of these requirements is being carried out to ensure that network providers collaborate and share network infrastructure, and what action Ofcom has been taking against providers who have been found to not comply. When I wrote to Ofcom, it said its role is

“limited to enforcement of the Regulations”

and that, under those,

“operators have significant flexibility...to put up their own poles.”

I know that the Minister has been looking at a revision of the code of practice. We would be grateful if he could say more on that. I also welcome that he has stated that he reserves the right to change the law in this area.

It strikes me that stronger adherence to the regulations on sharing infrastructure is one of those rare examples where stronger regulation will actually save companies and consumers money. Surely it is cheaper for companies to co-ordinate with one another over the sharing of infrastructure than to erect new poles every time they need a new node for their network. It is baffling and frustrating that providers such as Brsk have not been more proactive in anticipating the concerns of the public before Ofcom has had to get involved. Fundamentally, my constituents of Birmingham Edgbaston are asking for respect: respect to influence decisions, and to ensure that broadband infrastructure is implemented in a way that respects their local environment, heritage and public interest.

I would be grateful if the Minister could provide an update on work to amend and strengthen the code of practice, so that operators respond to and engage in good faith with residents. I would also be keen to hear the outcome of his recent engagement with Brsk, having shared with him my experience of dealing with it, and to understand what more we can do to ensure that providers work together to share infrastructure, and that the requirements under the 2003 regulations are adhered to and enforced. I thank the Minister for his attention and look forward to working with him.

4.49 pm

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): It is a great delight to sit under your chairpersonship, Ms Vaz. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on securing this debate. I think she knows that she is one of my favourite MPs; we have canvassed together often in variety of places, so it is a great delight to hear from her.

My hon. Friend speaks of being an active constituency MP, and that is precisely what she has evidenced. She is not alone on this issue. The list of MPs who want to talk to me about ducts and poles is quite long, because a lot of people are concerned. They fully understand, as she has laid out, that we want to roll out better infrastructure. If we are going to have the digital economy that we want for the future and if we are to compete with other countries around the world, we certainly have to get digital infrastructure rolled out. Obviously, the Government are not going to pay for all of that—that would be a very big ticket item—so we want as much of this as possible to happen on a commercial basis, and I will refer in a moment to the comments of the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) about the business model that people may be adopting.

We also do not want to have a single operator delivering for the whole country, which is why it is important to have a degree of competition. When I was in opposition, I was very opposed to the idea of monopoly in provision through Openreach or, for that matter, any other player simply because monopoly does not tend to be good for consumers. It tends also to make an incumbent lazy, and it can lead to anti-competitive practices.

For all those reasons, we have ended up with the system that we have, and we want to roll out gigabit-capable broadband to as much of the country as possible. The Government will intervene in the areas where that will not happen commercially, but I say to the hon. Member for Wyre Forest and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston that we have to be a bit careful about saying, “It’s disgraceful that these people are making money”, because if they did not make money, they would not be rolling it out on a commercial basis and then we might have to intervene a great deal more in the market. But there is a countervailing argument: if operators behave in a way that lacks compassion or sensitivity to the local situation, it is extremely unlikely that anybody in that local community is going to buy their products, so it could destroy their commercial agendas and business strategies if they are so high-handed in their approaches to local communities when it comes to the siting of poles and so on.

Mark Garnier: I thank the Minister for his letter, which was incredibly helpful; I am grateful to him for engaging on this. The point I was making was not that the business model is about a cash flow revenue coming from the delivery of broadband, but that some of these businesses are cynically creating a capital asset that they then want to sell off. It is the infrastructure asset, not the cash flow, that they are after. That is where we get this competition of people building out the poles to create a capital value asset, not a cash flow value asset.

Chris Bryant: I do not know whether that is right or not, so I will reserve judgment, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. It is certainly true that there may be some consolidation in the market in the next 18 months to two years. Some people have been expecting that before now. Whether that would apply to Brsk or not, I have not the faintest idea, but the point remains that, if these organisations are to have a successful business model, in the end they do need to be able to sell take-up.

One thing that is missing from this whole conversation is an explanation to the public of why on earth anybody might need fibre. Notwithstanding the areas in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston where they do not even have 10 megabits per second, which I hope we might be able to do something about in the near future, lots of people say, “Well, I’ve already got 100 megabits per second, so why on earth would I need a gigabit per second? Incidentally, I don’t know what a megabit per second is anyway.” In that world, we have to do a great deal more education about what the future is going to look like. It is certainly true that all the apps and the IT that the country and the Government are increasingly relying on are increasingly hungry for bandwidth; there is no way of avoiding that. My hon. Friend is absolutely right in saying that we need to develop this infrastructure.

This Government have been very clear, and the previous Government were relatively clear, that we wanted this infrastructure to progress in a way that was sensitive to local communities. That meant that we had to have proper consultation and to be careful about the siting of poles. We wanted to encourage co-operation and collaboration between different players in the market, so that roads were not dug up two years in a row or

[Chris Bryant]

three months after the last company dug it up, for example. All that was laid out in the original guidance in 2016. Incidentally, that guidance was provided not by the Government but by the industry. This is an important point: the industry is currently looking at revising that code. It is very close to a revised version. I do not think that that is quite ready yet, but I anticipate that it might come in the new year.

The simple point that I have made repeatedly to all the operators in this field is that if they want people to take up their service and buy their product, they have to take people with them. At our meeting with Brsk last week, Brsk made it clear that if all the members of a community, especially one cut off from everywhere else and not on the way to another place, said, “Look, we don’t want this,” it would work out that there was no point putting in poles, digging up the road or whatever, because there would not be any take-up of its services from that community in future. It would simply say, “All right, fine. We’re not going there.”

As I say, the difficulty lies where one road leads—as is often the case—to another, and the people on the next bit of road still want the roll-out even if the people on the first bit do not.

Tahir Ali: I thank the Minister for his intervention with Brsk and for getting the officers in for a chat with MPs last week, and I welcome what has happened since in my constituency. Does he agree that where existing underground infrastructure is already available, companies should be forced to use that rather than erecting poles that no one really wants or likes?

Chris Bryant: Let me be 100% clear: where there is existing infrastructure—ducts under the road or whatever—that can be used. In fact, it should be used and different companies should collaborate to make that happen. I am 100% clear that existing infrastructure should and must be used.

There are a few caveats, as the companies themselves would advance. Sometimes people think there is a duct when there is only a cable that has been laid straight into the mud underneath. Alternatively, the pavement might now be so full of different things, including gas connections, water connections, electricity connections and so on, that there is no space for anything else to be ducted through, or the duct sleeve is so full that nothing else can be put in and another sleeve cannot be put in either. I know that is quite a long set of caveats, but those are the realities of the situation.

The commercial reality is that inserting a new duct—that is, digging up the road and putting everything underground—might be very attractive to everybody in the community, but it is nine or 10 times more expensive than putting things on poles. If we want commercial operators to roll things out, there are certain situations where there are going to be poles. I cannot hide that from anybody; it is a simple reality.

As I was saying earlier, the cabinet siting and pole siting code of practice was issued in November 2016. It sets out guidance on best practice relating to deployment, encouraging operators to site apparatus responsibly and to engage proactively with local authorities and the local community. However, some of the things that I

have seen being put in—including by Brsk; not often by many other operators—are clearly in the middle of a pathway or driveway, or in other places that are completely inappropriate.

As I understood it in our meeting last week, and indeed in the exchange of letters after that meeting, Brsk committed to change its policy in such situations. At that meeting, Brsk also undertook to engage in far more proper consultation with people. It will not just put up a sign saying, “We are about to put a pole here,” and then put a pole up the next day; it will engage in proper consultation, which means going door to door and explaining things to people. In many areas, Brsk will bring the local community together for a public meeting.

One Member who came to that meeting with Brsk last week said that there had been such a public meeting in their constituency. It had been very effective and people understood the quid pro quo, which was that if there was no means of doing something by ducting, there would have to be poles; if people did not want poles, they would not get the roll-out of fibre; and other operators were not operating in that field. People said, “Okay, well in that set of circumstances, we still want this roll-out to happen, so we will live with poles.” I think most people can live with that model, but even when that is agreed, we still have to make sure that we do not put poles in the middle of someone’s driveway or where they will obstruct people and not meet the requirements of the disability measures in the Equality Act 2010.

As I said earlier, I know the industry has been working together closely. It is not easy or simple to get commercial operators that have their own investors and shareholders in competition with one another to sit down to agree a new guide and a new code of practice, so I pay tribute to everybody at the Independent Networks Co-operative Association for engaging in that way. The vast majority of the altnet companies engaged in that activity are absolutely determined. They want to take the community with them because they want to be able to sell their product, and because they are responsible players in the market. I pay tribute to them where they have managed to do that.

As Brsk knows, we will hold its feet to the fire on all the commitments that it has made in private meetings with me, in the meetings with MPs that we held last week, and in writing. Before it starts rolling out in a particular area, it needs to explore far more thoroughly what ducting might be available, which might be through BT Openreach or Virgin. It will consult properly in a local area where people lobby and argue that the siting of a pole is particularly inappropriate. It will look at moving it in so far as it possibly can.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): Does the Minister agree that the siting of poles is particularly important when we consider national landscapes? It needs to take into account the broader context. Does he also agree that, where local communities are willing to engage with operators and local authorities to fund undergrounding, that would be a good approach?

Chris Bryant: That is the first time that anybody has come to me and said that a local community would fund the ducting, which is an expensive business. All sorts of

competition issues might then arise. I am hesitant to advance a yes or a no to that, because one would have to explore whether that was in effect a state subsidy, how that would be provided and what kind of contract there would be for maintenance of the duct—I can foresee all sorts of problems. I am not trying to be a part of the blob, but simply to be as clear as I can about what is possible and what is not.

The hon. Member makes an important point about the desirability of poles in areas of natural beauty and whether we can or cannot have poles. I have seen many different instances—I have tried to go through as many of them as possible as a Minister—such as where people thought the issue was about a duct that somebody was refusing to use, and it turns out it is not a duct at all but a cable laid in sand, so I am quite hesitant about holding forth on where we can or absolutely cannot have a pole.

In case anybody thinks I am being nimbyish, I have poles in my street, and I am about to have another set of poles in my street. I am relatively chilled about that, but I fully understand the issue where someone has never had a pole in their street. Part of the area's beauty is that it looks remarkably like it did in the 18th or 19th century, and people want to preserve it that way. The downside is that commercially they will probably not get gigabit-capable and fibre-based broadband, which might be more of a problem for the community than having the poles.

I think I have exhausted the subject, unless anybody else wants to have a go at me. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston. I am sure that we will return to the issue as many times as necessary if Brsk refuses to fulfil its promises. I believe that when we sat down with the senior management, they were sincere and honest in the commitment that they were making, and that they did not have as full an understanding of people's feelings in some communities as they needed to have. As I promised my favourite MP—I cannot say that too often—I will hold the company's feet to the fire throughout.

Question put and agreed to.

5.4 pm

Sitting suspended.

Rural Cycling Infrastructure

5.7 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cycling infrastructure in rural areas.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the Minister for being here to listen to this important debate, and I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am a member of Oxfordshire county council.

During my time living in the Netherlands as a young student, not so many years ago, I experienced at first hand the ease of cycling. Villages and towns are interconnected by safe cycle routes, which make taking a bike the obvious choice. I fondly remember cycling from my university in Leiden to the beach in Katwijk. Never once did I feel concerned about the quality of roads or any danger; never once did I feel the need to take a car.

Later, living in Brussels, I saw the stark differences between the traditionally cycle-friendly Flemish region and the car-dominated capital city. However, conscious policy decisions are changing cities. Brussels, like many capital cities across Europe, including our own, is now reclaiming road space from private motor vehicles and giving it over to active travel.

I am proud to be part of the administration in Oxfordshire that pedestrianised the famous Broad Street, much to the criticism of local Conservatives, and is rolling out further measures across the city. These policy decisions in cities demonstrate that there is no natural order to transport infrastructure. Transport choices are made consciously and by design. Although much more needs to be done in cities and towns, rural areas risk being left behind, and the consequences are paid in lives lost and lives ruined.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for giving way, and I congratulate him on securing this debate. He talked about connecting villages. In Oxford West and Abingdon we have Botley and Eynsham, which are both growing in population, but whenever designs are put forward, they are often missing the pots of money. Even though we tried to get a design linked to the expansion of the A40, we were told that we could not, because if we did, that bid would fail. That is entirely the opposite of what we would expect from a modal shift. Does my hon. Friend agree that the funding pots available and how they connect are at odds with what the Government say they want to do, particularly regarding a modal shift towards biking and other forms of active travel?

Freddie van Mierlo: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that funding is key to resolving these issues. In particular, slashing the active travel fund from £200 million to £50 million, as the Conservatives did in 2023, was shameful.

While much more needs to be done in towns and cities, more also needs to be done in rural areas. Mortality rates on rural roads are 2.7 times higher per mile cycled than on urban roads. If the Government continue to ignore rural areas in policy development, it could have devastating consequences.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. I am very lucky that my constituency is interconnected by a series of rivers and canals, the Mid Cheshire waterways ring. When I am among council officers, I refer to it as “the fellowship of the ring”, just so they remember. It runs 26 miles around my constituency and is crying out to be used as a cycleway. It is far safer to use canal towpaths than traditional cycleways. They are already traffic-free, and it is much cheaper to develop the infrastructure and implement it. That potential no doubt exists nationwide. Does he agree that there is significant untapped potential for rolling out a cycle network across our canal towpath network?

Freddie van Mierlo: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I agree that we could make better use of the significant infrastructure that is already in place, whether that is canal towpaths or former railways and other such infrastructure.

I am calling on the Government today to commit to investing in safe, off-road cycling routes and segregated cycle lanes in rural areas. In Oxfordshire, I am pleased to share with this Chamber that the Liberal Democrat-led administration is taking steps to link up towns and villages that are characteristic of the stunning Chilterns national landscape, Oxford green belt and wider open countryside. The county has adopted Vision Zero, the ambition to eliminate deaths and serious injuries on our roads by 2030. It has already developed a strategic active travel network that draws lines on the map of prioritised cycle routes that would connect towns and villages to one another and to Oxford and cities of the surrounding counties. Yet for now, they remain just lines on a map, unfunded. The county adopted a new model to replace the old car-centric “predict and provide” methodology for deciding infrastructure and replaced it with “decide and provide”. Oxfordshire has decided, but it lacks the central Government funding needed to provide.

Even getting a simple project off the ground is a challenge. The Thame to Haddenham greenway is a project that has been mooted for more than 20 years. It would connect the market town of Thame, the largest settlement in the Henley and Thame constituency, to the nearby village of Haddenham in Buckinghamshire, just two miles away. Crucially, Haddenham is host to the Thame and Haddenham Parkway rail station that links the town to London. Cycling from Thame to Haddenham currently requires a high degree of confidence and a tolerance for risk to mix in alongside the heavy traffic of the A418.

The wildly popular Phoenix trail from Thame to Princes Risborough already proves high demand for off-road rural cycle infrastructure, but it is not just funding that is stifling the rural cycling revolution. Compulsory purchase powers are often wielded to make progress on road projects but are not used to deliver cycle infrastructure. This means that most projects barely get beyond the idea phase.

A cycleway that links Chinnor to Watlington via the village of Lewknor in my constituency, which sits just next to the M40, would transform the lives of thousands of people by providing an active travel link to London and Oxford via the Oxford tube. However, ideas never make it beyond a general agreement that it would be quite nice, because local landowners oppose it. I urge

the Government to break free from the visionless Conservative legacy and take on these barriers to change. The Government must stop the lip service of the past.

In 2017, a walking and cycling strategy aimed to make active travel a natural choice. The Department for Transport active travel fund was set up to reallocate road space to cyclists and pedestrians and create an environment that is safer for walking and cycling. But words are cheap and here we are, seven years later. In rural areas, active travel is far from the natural choice.

In 2023, the Conservative Government, in a fit of reactionary culture wars, slashed the already paltry active travel budget from £200 million to just £50 million. Under this Government, I therefore welcome the increase in that budget to £150 million. However, let us not pretend that that will create a step change. The Conservatives had the budget at £200 million just three years ago. The Government should deliver on their promise to invest at unprecedented levels in active travel.

I hope that as a result of this debate, the Minister will consider increasing funding levels further for the 2025-26 period during the Department's current planning discussion. I ask that because cycling in rural areas as a mode of transport will deliver concrete benefits for the economy, the environment, health and wellbeing. For every pound spent on cycling and walking schemes, £5.62-worth of wider benefits is achieved. In 2022, active travel contributed £36 billion to the economy. Cycling networks give rise to tourism and flourishing local businesses, encouraging institutions and services to set up in or return to areas.

It is a privilege and a joy to live surrounded by nature in the villages and towns of my constituency, but it can also be isolating. Many villages lack places to exercise and few have regular buses to the places that do. The latest data for Oxfordshire shows that 58% of people in the county are overweight, and one in three year 6 children are overweight or obese. Cycling is an obvious means to increase physical activity in areas where small populations can make commercial or council-supported leisure centres unviable.

If we truly believe that there is a climate emergency, and I do, rural Britain must be part of the transformation, too. Reduced motor traffic limits carbon dioxide emissions and reduces nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter, with both gases linked to respiratory failure, stroke, heart disease, dementia and premature death. Do not think that just because rural areas are surrounded by fields that the risk is not present in the countryside, too. Historic towns can create choke points, quite literally, as vehicles move through them. Watlington's Couching Street has been an air quality management area since 2009, as traffic passes through in search of the M40. Again, cycling must be part of the picture, and that is before we talk about the mental health benefits, which I will perhaps leave others to touch on.

We have a golden opportunity over the next five years to see the transformation needed. I am willing to work cross-party with anyone in Government, and MPs and councillors across Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire, to seize it. I hope others will join me.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I expect to call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson at 5.46 pm, so given the number of Members wishing to speak, there will be an informal time limit of between four and five minutes.

5.17 pm

Ben Obese-Jeety (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. Cycling infrastructure in rural areas across my constituency is poor and, in most cases, non-existent. Too many of our towns and villages lack the connectivity required to make them easily reachable by bike, often including roads that cannot be cycled on and no feasible alternative routes. Even as a keen and confident sports cyclist, there are a number of routes in Huntingdon that I avoid using because they are objectively too dangerous to cycle on. That is evident when considering the impracticality of travelling into Huntingdon and St Ives by bicycle from many of our surrounding villages, which makes commuting by bike for work or school too difficult for too many.

St Ives is a town that desperately needs people to work and shop within it, yet it is largely reliant upon people driving into it. There are persistent traffic problems approaching the town from the east, with the Harrison Way roundabout a constant issue during peak times. Yet the Needingworth Road, which connects Colne, Bluntisham, Earith and Needingworth itself to St Ives, is the A1123—fast and arrow-straight, not well lit, and a road I would not advise anyone to cycle on.

Approaching St Ives from the north, we have the Somersham Road. Although only a B road, it is again arrow-straight and very fast, with significant use by lorries. It also includes the Wheatsheaf crossroads, which has seen a number of road traffic accidents. The county council is yet to spend the money that it has allocated to upgrade the junction and make it safer.

Huntingdon is particularly poorly served. In theory, the town has a cycle path around the ring road, but it is a shared cycle path with pedestrians that, in places, is no wider than a single individual. The tragic death of cyclist Celia Ward in 2020, who fell into the road after an altercation with a pedestrian on the cycle path, illustrates its unsuitability.

Approaching Huntingdon from villages to the north, towards the Wyton roundabout on the A141 into Hertford, is again a journey fraught with danger, and not one I would expect any cyclist to undertake as part of their daily commute. The A141 is one of the busiest and fastest roads in the constituency. In response to the recent consultation, I made it clear that cycling infrastructure must be considered in any new plans.

Meanwhile, there is only one current cycling infrastructure project under discussion in the constituency. As part of its plans to improve the national cycle network, Sustrans has proposed a quietway, closing the Grafham Road to motor vehicles between the villages of Grafham and Brampton. I regularly use that road as a cyclist, but it is also a vital lifeline between the two villages, and it reduces the need to take the more circuitous routes to the north and south that involve dual carriageways.

Opposition to the scheme from local residents, including those who are cyclists, has been significant, with many well-attended local parish meetings held to discuss it. The road is not busy, so a more sensible decision would be to reduce the speed limit from the current national speed limit to a more realistic 20 mph, thereby making the route far friendlier to pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians alike, without the need to ban motor vehicles and cut the village off.

In Tilbrook, the parish council is working hard to establish a feasibility assessment for the proposed “Kim Valley Way” cycle path, linking the villages of Tilbrook and Kimbolton and eliminating the need to cycle on a fast and sweeping country road with poor visibility on bends for those wishing to travel between the two villages by bike. It is schemes such as these—designed by locals, for locals—that we should invest our time and effort into delivering, rather than top-down diktats that lack local buy-in.

We must ensure that when cycling infrastructure is proposed, it is done so sympathetically and with the needs of local communities in mind. Attempting to railroad through a proposal because it looks good on paper is where schemes such as the Grafham quietway have gone wrong. A lack of engagement, a lack of understanding of rural needs and a lack of strategic planning are the reasons that we have reached the point where, in a constituency like Huntingdon, cycling is not considered to be viable for so many in rural communities.

5.21 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. Please accept my apologies, because I am likely to have to leave before the conclusion of the debate as I am hosting an event elsewhere on the estate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) on securing this debate. It is a privilege to speak on a matter that is of great relevance to communities like those in my Lewes constituency.

While cycling is often associated with urban transport solutions, it holds untapped potential to transform rural areas, if we address the challenges that prevent it from being a viable option for many. Two weeks ago, I had the pleasure of attending the Cycle Lewes annual general meeting. That dedicated group has been advocating for safer, more accessible cycling in Lewes and surrounding villages since 1998. Their work, from installing new cycle racks to critiquing transport plans that prioritise cars over active travel, is a testament to the power of local campaigning. However, as was made clear at the AGM, piecemeal progress cannot overcome the systemic barriers to cycling that rural communities face.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I thank you for your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I am from Stroud and for the past six years, even before I became a politician, I have been trying to get a greenway established in the village of Dursley that would run for about six miles to the train station. I found that there was not even funding for a feasibility study, so at the moment, we cannot get it off the ground. So I want to ask the Minister whether there will be a fund to make feasibility studies of new routes.

James MacCleary: Not being the Minister, I do not know, but I am sure that he will respond accordingly, and I hope that the answer will be yes, because that would be a fantastic thing to do. I know that county councils and other authorities have really struggled to find the funding for active travel undertakings across the country. We have certainly seen that in East Sussex, as the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) has in his area.

[James MacCleary]

Cycling is more than a recreational activity. It is an essential mode of transport that can improve public health, reduce carbon emissions and ease the financial burden of transport for households. Nationally, cycling directly contributes an estimated £5.4 billion annually to the economy, including £4.1 billion from reduced mortality, air pollution, and congestion. Every pound invested in walking and cycling infrastructure generates more than £5 in benefits. Cycling also promotes land-use efficiency, requiring far less space than roads or car parks—a critical consideration for creating greener, more liveable communities. For predominantly rural areas like mine, that represents an opportunity to create healthier, greener and more connected communities. Without serious investment, rural residents will continue to face unsafe roads, insufficient cycling facilities and limited transport options.

In communities like mine, the reality is stark. Public transport options are patchy and many depend on cars for short journeys. Safe and accessible cycling infrastructure could provide an alternative that is not only affordable, but sustainable. Where we have dedicated cycle routes, such as the outstanding separated cycling routes alongside the A27 between Lewes and Polegate in my constituency, they are often unconnected to any ongoing routes, which limits the number of people that can use them.

Better road maintenance is required. We need to create conditions in which cycling is a realistic option for commuting, shopping and even leisure—not just for the young, pale and male but for everybody. Inclusivity must be central to our approach. Whether it is for children cycling to school, older residents using e-bikes or families making short trips, cycling infrastructure should cater to a diverse range of needs. It is about ensuring that everybody can benefit from the independence, affordability and health benefits that cycling offers.

The Liberal Democrats have been clear in our commitment to reverse funding cuts and in pushing for a nationwide active travel strategy. In rural areas, that includes prioritising safe cycling routes, linking active travel to public transport and ensuring that local councils have the resources to tackle potholes and maintain pavements and cycleways, as well as to invest in active travel infrastructure. I urge the Government to recognise that cycling is not just a solution for urban areas, but a vital tool for rural communities. By investing in cycling infrastructure, we can reduce transport poverty, improve public health and build a greener future for areas like Sussex. Let us not miss this opportunity to make cycling safe, accessible and inclusive for all.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): It is customary to wait to hear what the Minister says—you might be delighted.

5.25 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) for securing the debate.

Wokingham is a semi-rural constituency where it is possible to cycle between villages and towns, and to railway stations, schools and shops. National and local surveys tell us that the majority of people would be willing to do this, but they do not consider it to be safe.

It is a difficult issue to resolve on narrow and busy country roads. Reducing speed limits can help, and the council is looking at some of them, but ultimately we need to invest in cycle routes away from the roads. The previous Government were funding such schemes, up until they decided that their electoral interest demanded otherwise, but since 2022 the funding available to local authorities has been wholly inadequate, and it remains so.

Shifting just a small proportion of local rural traffic from car to bike will help to solve many problems, including congestion, parking and air-quality issues in towns. There are mental and physical health benefits for those who cycle. The House of Commons Library has been helpful in pointing out a University of Oxford study that demonstrates the environmental benefits of active travel. Published in 2021, it found that switching just one trip a day from driving a car to cycling can reduce a person's carbon footprint by 0.5 tonnes a year. As demonstrated by the Elizabeth line, if the infrastructure is there, people will use it. Across Europe, the benefits are being embraced, while the UK fails to recognise the return on investment that is waiting to be realised.

The former Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh), stated that her Department would deliver “unprecedented levels of funding” for active travel; will the new Secretary of State commit to the same promise? Wokingham borough council has previously bid for an off-road route between Charvil and Twyford station; will the Minister commit to review the business case for investment in such cycling schemes?

5.28 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) for securing this important debate on rural cycling infrastructure.

Members present appreciate the unique challenges faced by cyclists in rural areas, and the need to ensure their safety if we are to promote greater accessibility for cycling as a mode of transport. Rural roads present unique risks: they are typically narrower, less well maintained, and shared with fast-moving vehicles. In places in my West Dorset constituency roads are also shared with horse riders, who are similarly desperately in need of safety infrastructure.

The road conditions make cycling on roads disproportionately dangerous. Statistics show that cyclists are almost twice as likely to be killed on a rural road as on an urban one. For my constituency the challenge is clear: only 1.7% of people cycle to work, and that figure is well below the already appallingly low national average of 2.1%. Both figures reflect the deterrent effect of unsafe rural roads and the lack of cycling infrastructure, but also the wider picture of cycling in this country.

Cycling can provide an affordable, sustainable and accessible alternative for shorter journeys, not to mention the benefits to the environment and to physical and mental wellbeing. In West Dorset, 50% of people drive to work, 14% of households do not own a car and 30% of residents travel less than 10 km to work. That distance is more than achievable by bicycle for most individuals. Between Bridport and West Bay, the old railway has been repurposed as a cycling and walking path, with

many residents hoping that it can be extended all along the old line to Maiden Newton to avoid their having to use country lanes. Similarly, an alternative cycle route between Bridport and Chideock would mean that residents and tourists alike could avoid the main coast artery of the A35, with its heavy goods vehicles.

Public transport in West Dorset is limited and irregular. Congestion on our few A roads and many country lanes causes delays and disruption in our villages. Cycling would reduce congestion, provide people with greater freedom to travel independently, reduce the environmental impact and support healthier lifestyles. I urge the Government to take immediate steps to address these issues and support rural constituencies such as West Dorset by making cycling a safer and more viable option.

5.31 pm

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) for securing what is an important debate for rural constituencies such as his and mine. Too often, only urban areas attract the focus for funding and infrastructure when it comes to active travel, yet the benefits to physical and mental health and wellbeing and in reducing carbon dioxide emissions and improving air quality are just as applicable, if not more so, in rural areas such as my North Cornwall constituency.

Cornwall is a region with very poor transport infrastructure and high car dependence. The Cornwall local transport plan sets out an ambition for at least 50% of journeys under 5 miles to be completed via active travel by 2030, which is only five years from now. A road network sufficiently free from harm and fear of harm supports wider environmental and public health ambitions and encourages and sustains the adoption of healthier, active modes of travel.

We have in my constituency one of the most popular off-road multi-use trails in the country—the Camel trail. Recent data shows that each year the existing trail attracts more than 400,000 users, of whom more than 50% are residents of Cornwall, and two thirds of these users are cyclists. Currently, only 1% of these trips are used to commute to work. However, with the growing popularity of e-bikes, this use has huge potential to grow.

Early feasibility work by Sustrans shows that there are two ways that the current trail could be significantly expanded to deliver cycling networks that are sufficiently free from risk or fear of harm to make the option of active travel, and especially cycling, an attractive alternative to using the car. I discussed the first expansion option with the Minister recently, so I hope he will bear with me as I set it out once again. The trail, which utilises a redundant railway line that follows the River Camel, could be extended inland to make its final destination the old market town of Camelford—providing much-needed regeneration and giving the residents who live there greater access to the countryside and a viable non-car commuter route to the larger towns of Bodmin and Wadebridge and elsewhere. That not only would help to meet Cornwall's active travel ambitions, but could provide the Government with an opportunity to meet one of their manifesto promises—to improve responsible access to nature and create nine new national river walks.

The second option would be to introduce a network of quiet lanes across the wider rural area, which would provide connectivity between outlying villages and the Camel trail, offering local people viable options for active travel for their day-to-day living needs. A feasibility study for that has already been conducted by local councillor Dominic Fairman.

The key design principles for rural quiet lanes are as follows. There is the introduction of 30-mph speed limits on roads that already have low motor vehicle flows. People walking, running, cycling and, where appropriate, horse riding should feel safe and comfortable to use the routes, and all users should be aware of those with whom they are sharing the surface of the lane or road, with signage and markings where appropriate. Quiet lanes are a key solution to connect people in rural areas. On many routes, there is insufficient space to build cycle tracks and other infrastructure next to roads. Quiet lanes can also help facilitate a rural modal shift by making people feel safer when using what are already light-traffic lanes for walking and cycling.

We need greater investment to start addressing rural transport poverty. We should make schemes such as those I have outlined a reality and deliver transport infrastructure fit for the carbon-neutral world to which we are aspiring. If the Government really are serious about their claim that they will cut GP appointments by millions by delivering unprecedented investment in our cycling and walking infrastructure, they must consider schemes such as the Camel trail connect project. We do not have a single main line train station in my North Cornwall constituency, but we already have a world-class cycle trail. Now is the time to expand it and fund that shovel-ready plan.

5.35 pm

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) for securing this debate, and the hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) for his excellent pun.

My home constituency of Tewkesbury is a patchwork of rural towns and villages. Public transport is either scarce or entirely absent, so cycling is an oft relied-upon mode of transport. Safe, managed cycle routes are vital for many of my constituents as a means to connect with our cathedral city of Gloucester to our south, the cultural centre of Cheltenham to our east, and the medieval town of Tewkesbury to our west. Only in those larger population centres can many of my constituents access their hospitals, schools, stores or social clubs.

Cycling in our rural communities comes at significant risk. As has already been stated, according to at least one study, cyclists involved in collisions on rural roads are more than twice as likely to suffer mortality than those on urban roads. There are several factors for that, including the time it takes for emergency services to arrive from major hospitals to our rural villages. Another factor seems to be that cycling infrastructure and roads in rural areas are poorly funded or neglected. Apparently, cycling routes are rarely considered alongside major highways infrastructure projects. There must be joined-up thinking to such projects to improve the viability of cycling as an environmentally friendly and healthy alternative to driving.

[Cameron Thomas]

The Gloucestershire cycle spine is an ambitious plan to link Gloucestershire's major population centres with some of our emerging population centres. The plan was initially met with significant public support, but several shortcomings with it have since caused outcry. Issues cited by residents in Longlevens including the fact that the camber of the cycleway draws water away from drainage and floods their properties with rainwater. In Churchdown, the road has been so narrowed to accommodate the cycleway that larger vehicles can now barely pass each other in places. A clear opportunity to link a cycleway to our heritage railway was missed.

This is not a pitch against such schemes; it is a call to keep the public engaged and ensure the projects are implemented not piecemeal but as a joined-up infrastructure plan so that the "so whats" are asked and answered ahead of the works. I am disappointed to learn that a shortfall in the central Government funding for Gloucestershire county council could mean a significant drop in the allocation for the Gloucestershire cycle spine. Consequently, the 14,000 residents of Bishop's Cleeve will remain cut off from it.

Like other transport networks, cycling needs to be treated as a vital part of our infrastructure. It must be planned strategically and funded sustainably for the long term.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): If no other Members wish to speak, I call the Lib Dem spokesperson, Steff Aquarone.

5.39 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) on securing this debate on such an important issue. He is a great champion of this cause. I know that he and his Liberal Democrat colleagues across Oxfordshire will continue to push for progress in their area.

I refer Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a member of Norfolk county council, but I must declare an even more important interest, which is that I am a rural cyclist. It is for that reason that I am so pleased to respond to today's debate for the Liberal Democrats.

In my area, we have some fantastic cycling routes. In Wells and Holkham, people can join national cycle network route 1 and travel through the north of the constituency as part of the Norfolk-wide rebellion way. Towards North Walsham, we have the Weavers way, which takes in much of the track bed of the former Midland and Great Northern joint railway.

The Liberal Democrats and I are ambitious for the future of rural cycling across the country. We want to see new cycle networks, and locally Liberal Democrats are working with communities to deliver on new cycling schemes in their local areas. It is a great shame that the previous Conservative Government did not match our ambition or enthusiasm for the future of cycling. They ruthlessly cut £200 million from the active transport budget, just after so many of us rediscovered our love for walking and cycling during lockdown.

That neglect for walking and cycling seems endemic within the Conservatives. Our Conservative-led county council has sunk £50 million into the white elephant that is the 6 km western link road. The legal and exploratory costs alone could have instead funded high-quality cycle super-highways six times the eventual proposed distance of that road. With attitudes like that, it is easy to see how our rural cycling infrastructure has deteriorated so badly over the previous decade, with Norfolk losing many of its routes from the national cycle network in 2020 after years of neglect and lack of upkeep.

Cycling will play a key part in the rural transport revolution, which so many parts of our country desperately need. We must make sure that cycling routes join up with public transport networks, so that people can safely and easily cycle to their nearest train or bus station. In my rural area, we have one of the highest levels of road per person in the country, and we cannot afford to maintain them all. Is it not time that we looked to convert underused and under-classified roads into access-only roads that prioritise walking and cycling? I am sure that many people would far rather hear the dinging of bike bells nearby than large lorries clattering through small country lanes.

I am passionate about seeing an improvement in rural cycling infrastructure across Norfolk and the rest of the country. Making cycling more accessible and attractive has only benefits. It keeps us healthier, it reduces carbon emissions and it gives us greater opportunity to explore and enjoy our natural environment. I very much hope that we hear from the Minister that the Government will match the passion and ambition of Liberal Democrats across the country to deliver better cycling infrastructure for us all.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I call the Opposition spokesperson.

5.42 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is lovely to see you in the Chair, Ms Vaz, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) on securing the debate. We have heard from many of the speakers today about the enormous benefits of cycling, and let us start with the most important one: it is enjoyable. It is healthy, and it gives people cardiovascular exercise, which leads to a better quality of life. Then there are the public sector aspects of it, which are reduced traffic congestion, reduced public transport crowding and reduced emissions in our hunt for net zero. However, it is not all positive, as there are a couple of negatives. One is the examples of road entitlement that we get from some aspects of the cycling community. I am a member of that community, and I hope I am not too entitled when I am on my saddle. The worst one, of course, is that we are exposed to MAMILs around our constituencies. I threatened my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) that I would namecheck him in that regard, because I saw him just this morning in his Lycra.

However, on balance, it is a huge net positive to us as individuals and to us as a society that we encourage cycling. That is exactly what the last Conservative Administration did, despite the brickbats thrown at them in a number of the speeches we have heard this afternoon. For example, the Liberal Democrat spokesman,

my neighbour the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), said that there were ruthless cuts to the active travel budget. However, he did not give credit to the previous Government for creating the fund in the first place, back in 2017. Yes, as the current Administration are beginning to find out, there is a need to take difficult decisions—I have heard that phrase more than once in the past few weeks—about how to spend public money, because it can only be spent once, but the previous Government invested £6.6 billion from central Government funding into active travel from 2016 to March 2025. That helped to create the national cycle network, which is some 12,000 miles of specialist cycle routes, but there is more to do. In my constituency, we have great cycle routes such as Marriott's way, the Weavers' way and the Peddars way—which was not mentioned earlier, but also links into our local community—but there are also frustrations. At the moment, we are dualling the section of the A47 in my constituency. A cycle route has been planned beside the dual carriageway, but with just a few hundred yards from North Burlingham, it could be linked into Acle and a much wider network. There is definitely more work to be done, because that was not part of the original scheme.

I welcome the Budget announcement that £100 million will go into cycling and walking infrastructure, but I am slightly concerned that that will happen only if the funding is confirmed in the Department for Transport's business planning process. The same goes for any funding over the two years after that. What will happen as a result of the spending review? I should be very grateful if the Minister would expand on his commitment to be a strong advocate for active travel with His Majesty's Treasury when it comes to the spending review. Can he confirm that that is one of his Department's key objectives?

It is not just cycle routes, though; we also use roads in the rural community. In fact, the vast majority of us who cycle regularly in the countryside use our roads—typically our B roads—as the mechanism for doing so. Because of changing weather patterns, potholes are an ever-increasing scourge. The last Administration spent £8.3 billion on road repairs, but I am the first to admit that there is plenty more work to be done. Potholes have a particular impact on cyclists, who typically ride towards the edge of the carriageway; that can be a real challenge for us as riders. Can the Minister also give reassurance that he will continue to advocate for increased investment in road infrastructure to support active travel and safer, well-maintained roads for all users, including cyclists?

I again congratulate the hon. Member for Henley and Thame. He is right to highlight the benefits and challenges of cycling in the rural community, and I look forward to the Minister's response, in which he will no doubt tell us all the things he will do to support that important activity.

5.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) on raising this important issue. He represents a constituency in a very beautiful part of rural England that, despite its proximity to the capital, is largely rural in nature. I thank the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire

(Andrew Cooper) for their interventions, and I thank the hon. Members for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), for Lewes (James MacCleary), for Wokingham (Clive Jones), for West Dorset (Edward Morello), for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire), for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) and for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for their contributions. In my speech, I will try to cover the points they have raised.

The hon. Member for Henley and Thame is right to highlight the fact that there can be particular challenges in designing safe routes for cyclists in rural areas. There are many country lanes and B roads where the national speed limit applies and where there is clearly no room for a separate cycle lane. Such roads can be intimidating places for all but the most experienced of cyclists, with the constant risk of being close-passed at high speeds by inconsiderate drivers. By definition, narrow country roads also tend to have far less room on them than wide urban streets, where a segregated cycle lane can offer cyclists protection from other road users.

There has also perhaps been a perception, rightly or wrongly, that successive Governments of whatever colour have only really been interested in promoting active travel in urban areas, and have tended to ignore the very different needs of rural areas. I can assure the hon. Member for Henley and Thame, however, that this Government are determined to ensure that active travel—whether walking, wheeling or cycling—can address the transport needs of people in both urban and rural communities. I will come on to the different ways in which we intend to do so in a few moments, but let me first set out the broader context.

As we all know, active travel is a great way of improving people's health that can in turn ease pressure on our NHS. It has other benefits, including supporting economic growth, reducing congestion and helping to decarbonise transport. All of this matters just as much in rural areas as it does in our towns and cities.

Funding for decent infrastructure is critical. In the Budget, the Government underlined our commitment to active travel by announcing an additional £100 million of capital funding for active travel infrastructure in the financial year 2025-26. That reversed the previous Government's funding reduction.

In the very near future, Active Travel England will announce further details of the Government's investment plans for this year and next. I am confident that some of that investment will enable the delivery of high-quality active travel infrastructure in rural areas. However, I am afraid that the hon. Member for Henley and Thame will have to wait just a little bit longer to hear further details on that.

The Government will then set out what further funding for active travel will be available in future years, following the spending review. We will do so alongside producing a new cycling and walking investment strategy, which we anticipate will be published next year.

Wherever cycling infrastructure is built, it must be delivered to the right standard. In particular, it should comply with the Department's cycling infrastructure design guidance. Active Travel England provides training to local authority officers across the country on how best to design safe and accessible cycling and walking infrastructure, and it is developing specific guidance for the application of good practice in rural areas.

Layla Moran: The Minister has moved on to the “how”, but I wonder whether it is worth reflecting for slightly longer on the “why”. With my Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee hat on, I wonder whether he noted that the chief medical officer’s annual report last year on an ageing society mentioned cycling 13 times, in the context of meeting the needs of an ageing population. He might also have noted that rural areas age faster than urban areas because of demographic shifts. And he might also have noted that in the 2022 annual report, cycling was mentioned 88 times in the context of air pollution.

I note that the Government’s life mission is for people to live “well for longer.” To what extent is the Minister’s Department planning to be part of the delivery of that mission, and how is he making that happen?

Simon Lightwood: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I can assure her that the Department for Transport is working closely with Departments across Government; we want to break down the silos of Departments and work on our collective missions. I have already had discussions with the Department of Health and Social Care and Sir Chris Whitty regarding our contribution, and I will continue to have such discussions. I absolutely recognise that active travel can be fundamental when it comes to tackling people’s health issues and to removing barriers to opportunity and economic growth.

Ensuring that infrastructure is safe must be our overriding concern. Over 60% of respondents to the Department for Transport’s national travel attitudes survey said that safer roads would encourage them to cycle more. As I have said, rural roads can be more dangerous for cyclists, because there is faster-moving traffic and no space for segregated cycle lanes. That is why supporting local authorities to design and deliver high-quality active travel infrastructure that is safe and compliant with the relevant design standards is a key part of Active Travel England’s remit. It is also why funding provided by the Department for Transport for walking and cycling schemes comes with the clear requirement to comply with relevant design standards.

As the hon. Member for Henley and Thame may be aware, Oxfordshire county council has been successful in securing funding for active travel schemes in a number of rural areas. That includes nearly £1.5 million for a scheme in Abingdon and nearly £2 million for a scheme in Witney. The scheme in Abingdon will create a safe walking, wheeling and cycling route, providing new crossings and other improvements to overcome a significant barrier to active travel between Oxford and Abingdon, and onwards to Didcot and beyond.

Another example of a new scheme, which opened in the last few weeks, is in Wycombe, just across the county border from the constituency of the hon. Member. Buckinghamshire council completed an Active Travel England-funded improved pathway to support walking, wheeling, cycling and horse riding in Keep Hill wood, near High Wycombe.

The money for all these schemes has come from various dedicated pots of funding for active travel that have been announced by Active Travel England in recent years. In total, almost £650 million of funding has been provided for local authority infrastructure since covid. In addition, Active Travel England has worked with

National Parks England to provide £1 million funding to allow the 10 national park authorities in England to develop inclusive active travel plans, as well as supporting activities, such as scheme planning and design, and how best to make sure local stakeholders are engaged. All 10 projects are due to be completed by next summer. I gather, too, that there was a petition last year concerning a proposed off-road cycle route in the hon. Member’s constituency. If they have not already done so already, I encourage representatives from Oxfordshire county council to contact Active Travel England about that scheme if it is a viable possibility.

I will try to address some points made by hon. Members. As I said, Active Travel England provided £1 million grant funding to national parks, and is currently working on guidance for authorities on how to design and build safe infrastructure for walking, wheeling and cycling in rural areas, including villages and market towns. We expect publication in late 2025. Active Travel England is currently engaging with stakeholder groups to support that work, including both potential route users such as Disabled Ramblers, Cycling UK, the British Horse Society and so on, and guidance users including local authorities, Highways England and bodies such as the National Trust and national parks.

I will conclude by saying a big thank you again to all Members who contributed and to the hon. Member for Henley and Thame for raising this important issue. I look forward to continuing to work with him—I thank him for his offer to work on a cross-party basis towards achieving our active travel ambitions—and all other hon. Members to enable more people to choose to walk, wheel and cycle, irrespective of where they live.

5.56 pm

Freddie van Mierlo: Thank you, Ms Vaz, for calling me again. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

A number of issues were touched on, but I would like to zoom in on speed limits. My constituency has done an excellent job of embracing lower speed limits. Villages had the opportunity, under an innovative scheme run by the county council, to reduce speeds to 20 mph on many rural roads. That has had a really positive impact, with Oxfordshire seeing the largest reduction in collisions in the whole country. Research shows that a 1 mph reduction leads to a 6% reduction in collisions. Not everybody drives to the speed limit. As I tell my residents, if we set the expectation that everyone drives at 19.9 mph then we will see the scheme as a failure, but for the most part residents are law-abiding and respect the speed limit, and that has had tremendous benefits.

Several hon. Members spoke on the importance of bottom-up planning and not having a one-size-fits-all approach. Rural areas are unique and different—they are not all the same. Off-road infrastructure along canal paths and former railways, or the introduction of quiet lanes using existing road infrastructure, is all extremely valuable.

Some Members spoke about the importance of maintaining roads for all road users, whether vehicular or active travel. The previous Government left a £16 billion backlog in road maintenance. In my county, officers inform me that they receive only £15 million a year for highway maintenance, but that it costs the county upwards of £45 million to keep roads safe and that residents

would only see meaningful benefit if there was an increase to £80 million. The Minister spoke about investment in active travel in terms of millions; I would like to see him shift his vernacular from “m” to “b” and see billions of pounds invested over a number of years.

Members spoke about the importance of inclusivity. That is particularly important to me, having learned how communities approach cycling in the Netherlands. There, you will see people cycling in a leisurely way and carting all sorts of things. An approach where we have more children, more women, more vulnerable people and even disabled people taking part in cycling would

be a fantastic culture shift in the UK. When I was living in the Netherlands, I would even cycle 50 metres to the nearest post box from my house. That is the kind of culture shift I hope we can achieve, in both urban and rural settings.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered cycling infrastructure in rural areas

6 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 10 December 2024

EDUCATION

Early Years Funding 2025-26

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): This Government are clear that whoever you are, wherever you come from, ours should be a country where hard work means you can get on in life. Ensuring that every child has the best start in life is crucial to breaking down barriers to opportunity from the earliest point in our lives.

Early years educators, providers and local authorities are already doing incredible work to meet this mission and expand their provision so that more families can benefit from affordable, accessible and high-quality early education and childcare.

As announced in the 2024 autumn Budget, we expect to provide over £8 billion for the early years entitlements in 2025-26—an increase of more than 30% compared with 2024-25—as we work towards the expansion of the entitlements.

Today we have also published the new early years local authority core funding rates for 2025-26. The national average three and four-year-old hourly funding rates of local authorities is increasing by 4.1%, the two-year-old hourly funding rates is increasing by 3.3%, and the nine months to two-year-old hourly funding rate is increasing by 3.4%. As usual, the hourly funding rates will vary between local authorities, reflecting the relative needs of the children and different costs of delivering provision across the country.

To ensure that providers are set up to deliver 30 funded hours of childcare and early education for children aged nine months to when they start school, and that parents are able to access this across our communities from September 2025, on top of over £8 billion through the core funding rates we will be investing an additional £75 million of revenue funding in 2025-26 through an expansion grant, recognising the significant effort and planning to prepare for the final phase of the expansion. This grant is on top of over £8 billion provided through the core funding rates.

It is essential that high-quality early education and childcare are accessible for all children and families, given the importance of the early years of life. However, currently there are gaps in both provision and quality, especially for disadvantaged children. That is why we are delivering the largest ever uplift to the early years pupil premium, increasing EYPP rates by over 45% per hour in 2024-25 to £1 per hour in 2025-26, equivalent to up to £570 per eligible child per year.

This unprecedented increase is an investment in quality early education for those children who need it most, providing additional support for disadvantaged children to meet development goals at age five.

Eligible children can also receive £938 per child per year through the disability access fund to support reasonable adjustments for children with a disability. We also expect to spend £92.6 million on maintained nursery school (MNS) supplementary funding in 2025-26, in recognition of the additional costs that MNSs face.

It is important that providers can plan ahead. Therefore, we have set the expectation that local authorities communicate their rates to providers by 28 February 2025 at the latest, and we will be working with local authorities to support them to do this. This will become mandatory from 2026-27.

From April 2025, we are increasing the minimum pass-through requirement, meaning that local authorities must pass on at least 96% of funding to providers, as part of a phased approach to a 97% pass-through in the future.

Full details on the 2025-26 local authority hourly funding rates, including step-by-step tables, have been published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS292]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Calais Group

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Today I, jointly with German Interior Minister Faeser, convened Calais Group partners Belgium, France and the Netherlands in London, in the presence of the European Commission and its agencies, Frontex and Europol, to deliver real and tangible results on the fight against the dangerous people smuggling networks that threaten our collective border security.

At this important forum, all Calais Group partners agreed to jointly deliver the Calais Group priority plan in 2025. This plan is testament to our shared commitment to dismantling the people smuggling networks. It builds on our excellent joint working through existing structures and refocuses shared priorities to bring to justice those who undermine our border security.

The priority plan contains actions which will deliver enhanced co-operation in 2025, taking a whole-of-route approach to tackle the end-to-end criminality of migrant smuggling networks, who continue to deploy more dangerous tactics, putting lives at risk.

The key areas of collaboration include:

Co-ordinating preventative communications to deter irregular migrants from paying organised crime groups to facilitate dangerous journeys.

Strengthening our ability to work together, via Europol, to enhance targeting and disruption of prominent OCGs and their criminal supply chains. We will do so through deepening intelligence and information sharing, and ensuring there are effective and robust legislative frameworks criminalising the small boat supply chain, with a focus on evolving tactics and targeting the end-to-end criminality of the Kurdish-Iraqi OCGs involved in smuggling migrants into and across Europe.

Tackling the use of social media by OCGs to recruit and advertise dangerous journeys across Europe and the channel to migrants.

Targeting the illicit finance models of migrant smuggling networks to better target preventative, investigation and disruption efforts in order to take action on criminal finances and ensure that migrant smuggling is not a viable or profitable business.

Enabling reciprocal exchange of the most pertinent information relating to migration flows and border security issues to better understand and respond to emerging trends and migrant flows.

That demonstrates the commitment of near-neighbour partners to breaking the business model of migrant smuggling networks, and reaffirms our resolve to use every tool available to ensure that these criminals are brought to justice.

Alongside this crucial meeting, the Government are also today publishing a statement on delivering border security, setting out our approach to establishing the border security command, tackling organised immigration crime and improving the UK's border security. The new border security command will lead and drive forward the required step-change in the UK's approach to border security, including our international response.

Organised immigration crime is a global threat, with no respect for national boundaries. Tackling it requires working closely with international partners. The border security command is scaling up efforts with key near-neighbour partners and the EU, through the Calais Group, to disrupt the people smuggling trade and the criminal gangs that profit from it.

Copies of the Calais Group priority plan and the delivering border security statement will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and will also be published on www.gov.uk later this afternoon.

[HCWS293]

Irregular Migration: UK-Germany Joint Action Plan

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): Organised immigration crime is an international problem that requires international solutions. That is why we are substantially scaling up collaboration with international partners to disrupt the people smuggling trade and the criminal gangs that profit from it.

Yesterday, I signed a landmark agreement with the German Federal Minister of the Interior and Community, Nancy Faeser. The UK-Germany joint action plan to tackle irregular migration will deliver strengthened investigative and prosecutorial responses to organised immigration crime, alongside enhanced intelligence sharing

between our respective law enforcement agencies, and greater co-ordination of our efforts in source and transit countries to tackle irregular migration at source.

Many of the same criminal smuggler gangs that organise small boats in the channel are also operating in Germany and across Europe, with an impact on the security of all our countries, and therefore stronger law enforcement across borders is essential to tackle the dangerous gangs, illicit finance and supply chains involved.

There is recognition on both sides that activities on German soil that facilitate migrant smuggling towards the UK require a clarified legislative approach. Once enacted, this legal change will make it easier to disrupt and prosecute organised crime, including making it easier to significantly increase the number of arrests and prosecutions made in relation to the supply of small boats equipment—ensuring that those driving this trade are brought to justice.

Germany is a key international partner in our efforts to tackle people smuggling and the organised criminal groups that profit from this trade. The joint action builds on our existing co-operation with Germany and will deliver a new framework for enhancing our joint efforts to tackle organised immigration crime.

Minister Faeser's visit to London yesterday included a visit to the National Crime Agency's headquarters for a briefing on the scale of the small boats supply chain, existing operational co-operation between our respective law enforcement agencies, and the further co-operation that UK and German law enforcement agencies can undertake together through the joint action plan.

A copy of the UK-Germany joint action plan will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and will also be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS291]

Petition

Tuesday 10 December 2024

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

No. 84/85 bus service in South Gloucestershire

The petition of residents of Gloucestershire,

Declares that the No. 84 and 85 Yate & Wotton-under-Edge Circular bus service should be re-instated.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to consider the needs of rural areas when allocating funding for bus services, and to take steps to encourage the re-instatement of the No.84 and 85 Yate & Wotton-under-Edge Circular bus service in South Gloucestershire.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Simon Opher, *Official Report*, 28 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 1000.]

[P003022]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):

The Government are determined to deliver better bus services throughout the country and are committed to working closely with local transport authorities, bus operators and passengers to ensure that vital bus services truly reflect the needs of the local communities that rely on them. We know that a modern transport network is vital to kickstarting economic growth, providing access to services and preventing isolation, while improving air quality and tackling climate change.

As part of the Budget, the Government confirmed investment of £955 million for the 2025-26 financial year to support and improve bus services. Gloucestershire county council has been allocated over £8 million of this funding for 2025-26 alone. The additional bus funding can be used to introduce new bus routes, make services more frequent and protect crucial bus routes for local communities. When allocating this funding, the Government have sought to target this funding where it is most needed. Every region in England will benefit from the funding, but particularly those areas which have been historically underserved, like rural areas and small towns.

Although the Government do not intervene on decisions regarding individual bus routes as they believe that local leaders are best placed to make decisions about local transport in their communities, the Government have set out their plan to deliver a better bus network. This plan is based around giving local leaders the powers they need and empowering them to choose the model that works best in their area, whether that be franchising, strengthened enhanced partnerships, or local authority-owned bus companies.

As announced in the King's Speech, the Government will shortly introduce a buses Bill to put decision making into the hands of local leaders right across England. As part of the Bill, the Government are considering a local network management measure that would give local authorities the power to ensure any reductions to bus services are made only where necessary.

The Government believe this plan will create and save vital bus routes, bringing to an end the postcode lottery that currently determines the quality of bus services by giving local leaders the tools they need to deliver an improved network. The Government will continue to work closely with local transport authorities and bus operators to ensure we can deliver the services that passengers and communities rely on.

Written Correction

Tuesday 10 December 2024

Ministerial Correction

EDUCATION

Topical Questions

The following extract is from Education topical questions on 9 December 2024.

Helena Dollimore: Parents, teachers and students in my constituency were horrified to find out that the University of Brighton Academies Trust has been taking a whopping 20% of the Government grant meant for our local schools and education. What is the Minister doing to resolve these issues and make sure that every child in Hastings and Rye gets the best quality education?

Catherine McKinnell: I agree with my hon. Friend. Outcomes in some schools in Hastings are just not good enough. We are all determined to drive up standards. Department officials continue to work with the University of Brighton Academies Trust on that. We are committed to ending its current financial model and to collaborating with school leaders on future budget setting to ensure we can drive high and rising standards in every school, including in Hastings.

[*Official Report*, 9 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 667.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for School Standards, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell):

Catherine McKinnell: I agree with my hon. Friend. Outcomes in some schools in Hastings are just not good enough. We are all determined to drive up standards. Department officials continue to work with the University of Brighton Academies Trust on that. **The trust is now** committed to ending its current financial model and to collaborating with school leaders on future budget setting to ensure we can drive high and rising standards in every school, including in Hastings.

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Tuesday 17 December 2024**

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