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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Wednesday 15 January 2025**

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# House of Commons

*Wednesday 15 January 2025*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### NORTHERN IRELAND

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Aerospace Sector

1. **Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): What steps he is taking to support the aerospace sector in Northern Ireland. [902088]

2. **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on securing the future of Spirit AeroSystems in Northern Ireland. [902089]

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):** The Government are working with the Northern Ireland Executive to help to ensure the best outcome for Spirit's aerospace production and its skilled and hard-working staff in the current commercial negotiations.

**Gavin Robinson:** It is welcome that the Secretary of State has visited the Spirit AeroSystems site a number of times. He will know of its importance to advanced manufacturing, and of its aeronautical history in Northern Ireland—it originated in 1908 as Short Brothers—and he will also know that at this stage there is a purchaser for about a third of the facility and a third of the staff. The current plan fails to recognise not only the integration of the units within Spirit AeroSystems, but its importance to the Northern Ireland supply chain. Will the Secretary of State join Unite and GMB in their call for the Government to support a one-sale solution, so that the integration of staff, work flows and supply chains continues to benefit for decades to come?

**Hilary Benn:** I agree with everything the right hon. Gentleman has said about the importance of the site and its history, but in the end there will be a commercial outcome. Airbus wants to buy the bit that makes the A220 wings, because it wants the site to produce more of them, and Boeing is seeking a buyer for the rest of the production. The right hon. Gentleman will be well aware of what else is produced on site. I continue to engage with all those involved, but, as I have said, in the end this will be a commercial decision. We do, of course, want to see the production and the jobs remain.

**Gavin Robinson:** The Secretary of State will know that the facility would not be there had it not been for Government investment and support. Guarantees were given not just to the people of Belfast, but to the staff

directly employed at Spirit AeroSystems. The Government have also engaged in discussions about Harland and Wolff and Navantia, and the fleet solid support ships.

The Secretary of State will share the concern that I felt yesterday about the news that the four Harland and Woolf shipyards across the United Kingdom would be going into administration, and he will know of the countless businesses throughout the UK that are owed tens of millions of pounds in respect of the work on those fleet solid support ships. We want their viability to continue, and we know of individual businesses that have been family-owned for generations and have succeeded. Can the Secretary of State indicate his endeavour to ensure that that viability will be at the forefront of his mind, so that we can deliver the fleet solid support ships in Belfast and Devon?

**Hilary Benn:** The administration announcement, which involves the other side of the runway, is part of a process to ensure that the takeover by Navantia goes ahead, because it is very good news. The right hon. Gentleman and I were present to celebrate that announcement, which provides security for the future. Ultimately the question of how to relate to those suppliers is a commercial matter for Navantia, but I am sure that it wants to build a good relationship with firms that will help Harland and Wolff to build the three fleet solid support ships.

**Katrina Murray:** While the contract with Airbus is welcome, there is concern about the split of the Spirit plant in Belfast. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that wider defence and aerospace contracts with companies such as Skyrora in my constituency that are held in Belfast by the non-Airbus part of Spirit will not be put at risk because of that?

**Hilary Benn:** I understand my hon. Friend's concern. We will know the answers to these questions when the commercial negotiations are concluded, but I will draw the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland to the specific issue that she has raised in relation to her constituency.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): The Government have a visibly strong relationship with Airbus in respect of its presence in north Wales. What representations is the Secretary of State making to ensure that there is equivalent investment for the Spirit AeroSystems workers in Belfast?

**Hilary Benn:** The fact that Airbus wants to acquire the A220 wing production and wants more A220 wings to be built in Belfast is, I think, a sign of its willingness to invest and to see that production grow and prosper.

#### Public Services

3. **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on improving public services. [902090]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson):** Public services in Northern Ireland continue to fall behind, and the people of Northern Ireland deserve better. I raise this regularly

with Northern Ireland Ministers including the Education and Health Ministers, and the Government are fully committed to helping the Executive to make the urgent reforms that are needed.

**Peter Swallow:** Integrated education is an essential part of reconciliation, so does the Minister share my disappointment at the Northern Ireland Education Minister's decision last week to reject the bids by Bangor academy and Rathmore primary to become integrated schools, which had the support of a majority of parents at both schools?

**Fleur Anderson:** Yes, I do. Integrated education is a devolved matter for the Executive, but this Government are unapologetically supportive of integrated education. I have spoken to the headteachers of Bangor academy and Rathmore primary school this week, and they, as well as parents and pupils at the schools, are shocked by the decision. I hope that the Education Minister will work with them to resolve his concerns and listen to parents, who overwhelmingly want their children to benefit from integrated education.

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): The Minister talks of transformation. When the Executive were restored at this time last year, the Government put a pot of £235 million into transformation. A senior Northern Ireland Office official sits on the board. To date, not one penny has been spent on supporting the transformation of either the health service or the education service. Can the Minister update the House on what the hold-up is in regard to spending that money?

**Fleur Anderson:** I thank the hon. Member for raising the issue of the Public Service Transformation Board. As he says, the interim board has a £235 million budget for transformation. Several major projects—on health, special educational needs and justice—are now being sent to the Northern Ireland Minister of Finance for agreement, and I have pushed for the full board to be set up by the end of this financial year. I agree that it needs to move ahead and get those projects done.

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

**Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The Executive have warned of very serious pressures facing the NHS in Northern Ireland, which has the worst waiting times in the United Kingdom—more than six years for some surgeries. Labour's manifesto committed to improving public services in Northern Ireland, and it is clear that money alone is unlikely to solve the problem. What other tangible support will the Government offer the Executive to reduce waiting times for people in Northern Ireland, or will they just devolve and forget?

**Fleur Anderson:** The hon. Member is correct to raise the issue of public services, especially health services. The winter pressures on hospital care and other areas have been shocking to see, and I am grateful to health workers for their work on the frontline at the moment. This week, I met the UK Government's Health Minister to talk about how we can provide tangible support, and we have already done so. As the hon. Member says, funding is not the only answer; it is also about sharing best practice and expertise. This Government have committed to doing that through the Public Service

Transformation Board, but there are other practical ways in which we can work together on the best ways to reform.

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

**Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): A&E waiting times in Northern Ireland now exceed 12 hours in some hospitals, patients are being treated in the back of ambulances because of a lack of beds, and Dr Alan Stout, the chair of the British Medical Association's Northern Ireland council, has told the Northern Ireland Committee today that Northern Ireland is in a particularly bad place when it comes to health services. What conversations have the Secretary of State and Minister had with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that they have the resources that they need to cope with this immediate crisis? Are Ministers convinced that the 124% fiscal floor is adequate for addressing this issue in the long term?

**Fleur Anderson:** I have met the Minister for Health, and I have been round and visited many of the healthcare provision services, all of which are feeling pressures at this time as a result of successive Executives not tackling reform and being absent along the way. That is why we set up the Public Service Transformation Board. The Executive face huge challenges, and this Government's priority is to work with them. The funding is there, the Executive are committed, and they need to work together to deliver change urgently.

### Legacy Discussions

4. **Claire Hanna** (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): What progress his Department has made on reforming the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery. [902091]

11. **David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): What discussions he has had with stakeholder groups on Northern Ireland's legacy. [902100]

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):** As I set out on 4 December, the Government have now begun the process of repealing and replacing the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 through a proposed remedial order, and we will bring forward primary legislation, including to reform the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery. In preparing for that, I will continue to talk to all interested parties.

**Claire Hanna:** Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney described Sean Brown as a man of "goodwill and integrity" who represented something better than we have grown used to. We meet the day before his family are forced back to court, and in the week of the anniversary of the Kingsmill massacre; the sole survivor, brave Alan Black, is waiting for a long-overdue ombudsman report. Those two incidents were among the most nakedly sectarian in a squalid conflict, but decades on, those in and out of uniform who created victims—rather than the victims themselves, who have lived with the consequences for decades—are still driving the process. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that his forthcoming proposals, which I know he is working on intensively, remove the NIO veto under the guise of national security? Will he commit to root-and-branch reform of ICRIR and to

exposing collusive behaviour, and will he hold to the standards agreed by all parties in both Governments at Stormont House?

**Hilary Benn:** I have met both the Brown family and Alan Black, the sole survivor of the Kingsmill massacre. The trauma they have been through is hard for anyone else to appreciate. We all look forward to the publication of the ombudsman's report on the Kingsmill massacre. I want to see a full investigation into the murder of Sean Brown, but there is an appeal on wider matters and I cannot comment further. I am committed to fundamental reform of the independent commission.

**David Smith:** My first full-time job in the early 2000s was setting up and running a peacemaking programme for young people in Northern Ireland, so I am pleased that the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery was salvaged from the remains of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. However, I am concerned that in the discussions around legacy the goal of cross-community reconciliation is being treated as secondary to information recovery for individuals, important as that is. How will my right hon. Friend ensure that ICIR works with key stakeholders to foster cross-community reconciliation in Northern Ireland?

**Hilary Benn:** My hon. Friend raises a really important point. Enabling families who have suffered for so long and who have not found answers to what happened is a fundamental part of facilitating the process of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The truth is that we have to work on both aspects.

**Sir Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): The Secretary of State knows that I agree with many aspects of the repeal of the legacy Act, but the Policy Exchange report this week, as the newspapers have reported this morning, raises significant concerns about the repeal of sections 46 and 47. May I urge him to return to the previous cross-party position that we have to block compensation payments to terrorists such as Gerry Adams?

**Hilary Benn:** I have indeed seen that report. The problem is that the approach set out in the legacy Act has been found, in that respect and many others, to be unlawful. Of course we will continue, as the previous Government did, to see whether we can find a lawful way of dealing with the issue that the right hon. Gentleman has identified. That work will continue.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that the job of the commission in helping people to deal with the past is made much more difficult when we have reprehensible incidents such as Sinn Féin First Minister Michelle O'Neill attending and speaking at a commemoration of three IRA terrorists who died when the bomb they were transporting through County Londonderry in 1971 exploded prematurely, killing them rather than the innocent people they intended to murder, and when we now have the possibility that the former Sinn Féin leader and terrorist Gerry Adams may be about to receive compensation?

**Hilary Benn:** As I said a moment ago, the process of reconciliation and coming to terms with the past is a difficult and itself a troubled process. Lots of people have been on a journey and we need to continue to see that journey followed. People will express their views about the stance that different people have taken, but since the hon. Gentleman has mentioned the First Minister, I welcome the fact that, for the first time, she attended the Remembrance Sunday commemorations.

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

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I would like to return to the question that has just been raised by the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith). When the previous Government passed their legislation, the Labour party was in favour of the amendments made in another place that ruled out compensation to people such as Gerry Adams and others similarly detained in the 1970s. Why have the Government now changed their position?

**Hilary Benn:** The courts have found those clauses to be unlawful. The last Government passed legislation to enable terrorists to get immunity. The last Government passed legislation to deny people in Northern Ireland the right to bring civil claims, including against terrorists. The Conservative party has never apologised for doing both of those things. It is about time that it did.

**Alex Burghart:** Let us return to the matter of Gerry Adams. I am sorry to say that I must correct the Secretary of State. The High Court found that those provisions of the legacy Act were unlawful, but it is well within the Secretary of State's power to appeal that judgment. He has dropped that appeal. I do not wish to teach the Secretary of State to suck constitutional eggs, but he will know full well that it is also within the sovereign power of this Parliament to give legal basis to the Carltona doctrine, which has been in place since the 1940s. Or would he rather pay compensation to Gerry Adams and people like him?

**Hilary Benn:** Nobody wants to see that. The Supreme Court judgment that ruled that the interim custody orders following internment were not lawfully put in place, in which the Carltona principle was much discussed, was in 2020. The last Government did nothing about that for three years, until they belatedly accepted an amendment in the House of Lords that has now been found to be unlawful. It is a complex and difficult question—the last Government found it difficult—but we will continue to follow the same path to see whether it is possible to discover a legal means of dealing with the problem that the hon. Gentleman has identified.

## Economic Growth

5. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to help grow the economy in Northern Ireland. [902092]

7. **Alan Gemmell** (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help grow the economy in Northern Ireland. [902094]



9. **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to help grow the economy in Northern Ireland. [902097]

10. **Dan Aldridge** (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help grow the economy in Northern Ireland. [902099]

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):** The Government's mission is to encourage growth in Northern Ireland through increased investment, job creation and higher living standards. The Government are working closely with the Northern Ireland Executive to develop Invest 2035, the UK's modern industrial strategy.

**Chris Vince:** Northern Ireland's economy has strong and dynamic sectors, from agrifood to aerospace, and from shipbuilding to cyber-security. Does the Secretary of State agree that Northern Ireland has a vital part to play in the industrial strategy?

**Hilary Benn:** It certainly does. My hon. Friend alludes to a number of the great strengths of the Northern Ireland economy. The deal with Harland and Wolff, which I mentioned earlier, is another sign of the Government's commitment. Of course, the Northern Ireland economy has access to both the EU and the UK markets.

**Alan Gemmell:** Does the Secretary of State share my optimism that UK Government funding for all four of Northern Ireland's city and growth deals, confirmed in the autumn, provides a great basis for all of Northern Ireland to generate growth and opportunity?

**Hilary Benn:** I certainly do, and I have been greatly impressed by the commitment of those involved in developing the growth deals to investing in boosting economic growth in their areas.

**Jayne Kirkham:** Could the Secretary of State update the House on what recent discussions he has had with the Executive about steps to increase revenue, in order to help to deliver longer-term financial sustainability and grow the economy in Northern Ireland?

**Hilary Benn:** I have had a number of discussions with the Executive on that subject, and I am pleased to see that the draft budget for next year contains a plan to raise further revenue to meet the £113 million requirement that was part of the budget restoration agreement. It is really important that the Executive raise additional funds to meet the challenges of improving public services.

**Dan Aldridge:** There are many dynamic tech and digital companies at the vanguard of the mission for economic growth in Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State agree that these industries are critical to Northern Ireland's economic future? What steps are the Government taking to support these industries in growing to their full potential?

**Hilary Benn:** There have already been discussions with businesses in Northern Ireland about the part they can play in the industrial strategy. Cyber-security is a really good example of the huge strength of the Northern

Ireland economy; many companies, including from the United States of America, are investing in Northern Ireland because of the skill and expertise to be found.

**Sorcha Eastwood** (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for their responses so far. One response highlighted Northern Ireland as having dual market access. On that basis, do they agree that initiatives such as the Dublin-Belfast economic corridor in my constituency need support so that we can make the most of our economic opportunities?

**Hilary Benn:** I do indeed think that the Belfast economic corridor is a really good thing. We support it, and I look forward to seeing it develop and succeed.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Agriculture is really important to the economy of Northern Ireland. In Scotland, we breed excellent bulls, but it is very hard to sell them and get them into Northern Ireland because of the regulations and red tape, and vice versa for Irish bulls coming to Scotland. Will the Secretary of State see if we can make it easier for farmers on both sides?

**Hilary Benn:** I will look into the matter that the hon. Gentleman raises and I will come back to him.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): This week, the Prime Minister has spoken of the unbridled economic opportunities from developing artificial intelligence. It is not an unbridled opportunity for Northern Ireland, because instead of living under British regulations on AI, we live under much more restrictive EU regulations. When will the Secretary of State move to release Northern Ireland from the restrictions, under the EU, of foreign jurisdiction?

**Hilary Benn:** The substantive provisions of the EU AI Act do not currently apply in Northern Ireland, and they would apply only following agreement by the withdrawal agreement joint committee. Any decision would be subject to the democratic safeguard mechanisms in schedule 6B to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): In his Union connectivity review, Lord Hendy, now a Minister in the Government, identified that upgrading the A75 would have significant economic benefits, not just for Northern Ireland but for the whole of the United Kingdom. There was another fatal accident on that road in my constituency last week. Will the Secretary of State join the Secretary of State for Scotland in putting pressure on the Scottish Government to finally move on upgrading that vital economic route?

**Hilary Benn:** It is indeed a vital economic route, and like the hon. Member, I look forward to seeing it improve, not least in the interests of safety, as quickly as possible.

### Supply of Goods: EU Regulations

6. **Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): What steps he has taken with Cabinet colleagues to prevent disruption to the supply of goods to Northern Ireland from Great Britain since the introduction of the EU general product safety regulations. [902093]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson):** The updated EU general product safety regulations largely formalise how businesses already operate in the UK, and the majority of businesses have adapted to continue trading within the UK and with the EU. In December, the Government published guidance for businesses on the application of the regulations in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State has this week met ministerial colleagues, and will keep this under review.

**Sammy Wilson:** As a result of those EU regulations, thousands of consumers in Northern Ireland are denied goods from Great Britain, and rather than adapt, businesses in GB have simply abandoned the Northern Ireland market. At the same time, this week, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has banned the import of meat from Germany, where there has been a foot and mouth disease outbreak, but has not extended that ban to Northern Ireland because of the Northern Ireland protocol. While the EU protects its market, the UK appears to have abandoned the internal market of its own country. What will the Minister do to redress that?

**Fleur Anderson:** The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring a smooth flow of goods across the UK internal market. We understand that many companies have adapted easily to GPSR, while for some it is more difficult. The Secretary of State has met the Minister for business this week to discuss further guidance and assurance, and will continue to have such discussions.

#### **Employer National Insurance Contributions: Job Creation**

8. **Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the potential impact of proposed increases in employers' national insurance contributions on job creation in Northern Ireland. [902096]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson):** There are many pressures on businesses that we are constantly assessing and talking to businesses about. The hon. Member is right to raise the subject of job creation in Northern Ireland; it is a priority for this Government. We are supporting businesses in many ways, including through Invest Northern Ireland's fund for small businesses, and by directly supporting jobseekers through our funding for employment support schemes.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Sir Ashley Fox. [*Interruption.*]

**Sir Ashley Fox:** I am grateful for the warm welcome. How does the Minister expect businesses in Northern Ireland to grow and invest in their communities, given that they have to pay the enormous tax increases imposed by the Chancellor?

**Fleur Anderson:** Even after accounting for employer national insurance contribution impacts, the Office for Budget Responsibility expects real wages to rise by 3%. Raising the revenue to fill the £22 billion black hole required us to take difficult decisions, but they will result in improved public services, which is good for all people in Northern Ireland.

#### **Harland and Wolff**

12. **Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab):** What progress his Department has made on securing the future of Harland and Wolff in Northern Ireland. [902101]

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):** I welcome the industry-led deal that will see Navantia UK purchase Harland and Wolff's four shipyards in the UK, including that in Belfast. The Government have worked closely with Navantia UK to secure the future of the yards, the fleet solid support ship programme, and around 1,000 jobs across the UK.

**Chris McDonald:** Does my right hon. Friend share my optimism that now that the future of the Harland and Wolff yard has been secured, the yard will be able to secure future orders?

**Hilary Benn:** I certainly do. That is one of the great benefits of the commercial agreement that has been reached with Navantia on buying Harland and Wolff, and the adjustments made to the contract to ensure that the fleet solid support ships could go ahead. This is a great facility, and it is open for business, including for other orders.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** A company in my constituency of Strangford is among those that will suffer because of Harland and Wolff being in administration. This small family firm—I will not put its name in *Hansard*—will lose half a million pounds. The impact on that company and others is quite catastrophic. What can be done to help those companies that, through Harland and Wolff being in administration, will either not be able to trade, or risk losing out entirely?

**Hilary Benn:** I recognise the hon. Gentleman's concerns. This is a product of the failure of the old Harland and Wolff. It now falls to Navantia to decide which of the invoices it wishes to pay, but it will want to secure a relationship with suppliers contributing to the fleet solid support ship programme.

**Mr Speaker:** Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, may I welcome the Speaker of the Assembly of the Republic of Albania, Elisa Spiropali, who is in the Public Gallery?

#### **PRIME MINISTER**

*The Prime Minister was asked—*

#### **Engagements**

Q1. [902211] **Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD):** If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 January.

**The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer):** I know that Members across the House will want to extend our thanks to President Biden for his steadfast leadership, and to warmly congratulate President-elect Trump ahead of his inauguration. In my conversation with President-elect Trump, we have underlined our shared commitment to the special relationship in the years to come.

This week, we launched our AI opportunities action plan, which, as part of our plan for change, will ensure that we seize the opportunities of AI to benefit working people. This will boost productivity, transform public services and deliver £39 billion of investment and more than 13,000 jobs.

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

**Mr Joshua Reynolds:** With almost 4.5 million entries and exits over the past year, Maidenhead train station is a busy transport hub, but with crowded gatelines, flooded underpasses and a drop-off facility that is not fit for purpose, the station needs major upgrades to give Maidenhead commuters what they deserve. Does the Prime Minister understand what Maidenhead residents face at the station, and will he commit his Government to fixing these issues in this Parliament?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Member for his question. I am pleased that his constituents are benefiting from upgrades at the station, including, I think, new lifts to make the station fully accessible. The issues that he raises are faced by passengers right across the country. That is why we are bringing rail services back into public ownership, setting up Great British Railways, and making ticketing simpler and fairer to ensure a better service for all passengers, including those in his constituency.

**Q4. [902214] Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab):** I recently visited MidKent college, which serves my constituency of Gillingham and Rainham. It teaches valuable construction skills to young people, but I have been informed that it faces significant challenges in recruiting teachers to deliver those courses. Does the Prime Minister agree that proper skills training and having the teachers necessary to deliver it is absolutely vital to growing our economy and building the homes that we need for the future? Will he agree to set up a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss the recruitment challenges that some colleges face?

**The Prime Minister:** Skilling up the next generation is vital to kick-start economic growth. Our plan for change will rebuild Britain by delivering 1.5 million new homes. That is why we have established Skills England, and are reforming our planning system and training the workforce. I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets the meeting that she wants with the relevant Minister.

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

**Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con):** On Friday, while borrowing costs hit levels not seen since Labour was last in government, I met business owners and their employees in Chesterfield. One of them told me that his business will not exist in four years' time because of this Government's policies. It might not even exist next year. The Prime Minister may try to blame his inheritance, or blame global factors, but why should anyone trust a word he says over what businesses are saying again and again—that his Budget means fewer jobs, lower growth and higher borrowing costs?

**The Prime Minister:** As the Leader of the Opposition knows, the global economy is experiencing volatility and higher borrowing costs. That is why it was vital that we took the tough and right decisions in the Budget to get our finances back in order. We had to deal with the £22 billion black hole that the Conservatives left. We made difficult cuts and raised taxes to invest in health, public services and housing—vital to stability, and vital to growth. We have an iron-clad commitment to our fiscal rules, and she will no doubt welcome the inflation figures this morning.

Contrast that with the Conservatives. They were not brave enough in government to take those difficult decisions. They have opposed all our measures to stabilise the economy and promote growth. They are back to the magic money tree. The Leader of the Opposition wants all the benefits of the Budget but cannot say how she would pay for them. They have not changed; they are still economic vandals and fantasists. Imagine where we would be if they were still in charge.

**Mrs Badenoch:** Just today, the British Retail Consortium has said that two thirds of businesses will have to raise prices to cope with the Prime Minister's tax hike. His Chancellor ignored all the warnings and ploughed ahead with an unprecedented borrowing spree, leaving all of us more vulnerable. Now we have businesses saying that they will raise prices to cover his jobs tax. We have an energy policy that will drive up bills, and all the while we are spending more day to day on debt interest than we do on schools and universities. The Prime Minister refused to repeat his Chancellor's promise that she would not "come back for more". Will he now rule out any new tax rises this year?

**The Prime Minister:** We took the right and difficult decisions in the Budget—decisions that the Conservatives did not have the courage to take, which left us in the mess in the first place. When it comes to tax, the Leader of the Opposition knows very well the limits of what I can say from this Dispatch Box, but we have an iron-clad commitment to our fiscal rules. We cannot just tax our way out of the problems that they left us, which is why we have put in place tough—[*Interruption.*] They were howling at the spending decisions. They would not take them, but we will stick to those spending decisions. Our focus is absolutely on growth, but their record—[*Interruption.*] They flatlined the economy. Their record is a mini-Budget that crashed the economy, the worst cost of living crisis in living memory, and leaving a £22 billion black hole. I am not taking lessons from them on the economy.

**Mrs Badenoch:** The Prime Minister knows very well that the Office for Budget Responsibility found no such black hole. He talks about a mini-Budget three years ago. Borrowing costs last week were at a 27-year high for 30-year gilts. The Chancellor is apparently promising to be ruthless in reducing spending. Let me suggest something that he should cut. There is no way that we should be giving up British territory in Chagos. He is rushing a deal that will be disastrous and that will land taxpayers with a multibillion-pound bill. Why does the Prime Minister think that British people should pay to surrender something that is already ours?



**The Prime Minister:** We inherited a situation where the long-term operation of a vital military base was under threat because of legal challenges. The negotiations were started under the last Government. The then Foreign Secretary came to this House to say why he was starting negotiations and what he wanted to achieve. He said that the aim was to

“ensure the continued effective operation”—[*Official Report*, 13 December 2022; Vol. 724, c. 865.]

of the base. That is precisely what this deal has delivered.

**Mrs Badenoch:** There is no one the Prime Minister can blame for this dud deal except himself. At the Budget, Labour was congratulating itself for having the first female Chancellor, instead of ensuring that the country had someone actually qualified to do the job. [*Interruption.*]

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I want to hear the Leader of the Opposition.

**Mrs Badenoch:** The Prime Minister claims he has full confidence in the Chancellor, but the markets clearly do not. Yesterday, the Chancellor repeated her promise to have “just one Budget per year” to provide businesses with certainty. The talk in the City is that she cannot meet her fiscal rules, and that there will need to be an emergency Budget. Does the Prime Minister stand by the Chancellor’s commitment that there will be only one Budget this year?

**The Prime Minister:** The Leader of the Opposition will be pleased to know that the Chancellor will be in place for many, many years to come. She will outstrip them. If we all thought that politics was about cheap points, I could criticise their Chancellors, but I do not have enough time to go through all the Chancellors they had. We have one Budget; that is what we are committed to. We have strong fiscal rules, and we will stick to them, unlike the Conservatives.

**Mrs Badenoch:** At a time of turmoil in the markets, the Prime Minister was distracted by the crisis around the former City Minister, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq). What does it tell us about his judgment that yesterday he said he was saddened that his close friend had resigned? This was an anti-corruption Minister under criminal investigation for corruption. Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel prize winner advising Bangladesh, said that London properties gifted to the former City Minister may be the proceeds of robbery. Will the Prime Minister offer Bangladesh the full support of our National Crime Agency in ensuring that any properties bought with stolen funds are properly investigated?

**The Prime Minister:** The former City Minister referred herself to the independent adviser. He found, as the Leader of the Opposition well knows, that there was no breach of the code. She knows that he found there was no wrongdoing, and the former Minister fully co-operated. She referred herself a week ago on Monday; I got the report yesterday; and she resigned yesterday afternoon. Compare that with the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), who breached the ministerial code. The Leader of the Opposition’s predecessor but two ignored it. It was the adviser who

then had to resign because he was not taken seriously, and the right hon. Member is now serving the Leader of the Opposition. What a contrast. Thank God the British public chucked them out.

**Mrs Badenoch:** The Prime Minister did not answer the question about the National Crime Agency—no answer on investigating dodgy Labour Ministers, just as last week he did not want an inquiry that might expose dodgy Labour councils. He knowingly appointed a convicted fraudster as his Transport Secretary. The anti-corruption Minister who he had full confidence in only days ago resigned yesterday in disgrace. He is negotiating a secret deal to surrender British territory, and taxpayers in this country will pay for the humiliation. Now it turns out that his Government may write a cheque to compensate Gerry Adams. That is shameful.

We left the Prime Minister the fastest growing economy in the G7. In just six months under his leadership, it has been taxes up, borrowing up, and mortgage rates up—and that is not all: business confidence is down, jobs are down, and growth is down. Can the country afford four more years of his terrible judgment?

**The Prime Minister:** Among that barrage of complete nonsense, there is one point that I need to address: the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, which will have been of real interest across the House. That Act was unfit, not least because it gave immunity to hundreds of terrorists and was not supported by victims in Northern Ireland—nor, I believe, by any of the political parties in Northern Ireland. The Court found it unlawful. We will put in place—[*Interruption.*] This is a serious point. We will put in place a better framework. We are working on a draft remedial order and replacement legislation, and we will look at every conceivable way to prevent these types of cases from claiming damages—it is important that I say that on the record.

As for the Leader of the Opposition’s claim and her nonsense, the Conservatives crashed the economy. I got a letter this week from a Tory voter in a Labour seat. I hope that they do not mind me saying who it was—it was Liz Truss. It was not written in green ink, but it might as well have been. She was complaining that saying she had crashed the economy was damaging her reputation. It was actually crashing the economy that damaged her reputation. What have we heard? All the Tories have is complaining. They have no defence for their sorry record—they do not even acknowledge it. They have no ideas, no policies. They are like a blank piece of paper, blowing hopelessly in the wind. No wonder the country put them in the bin.

Q6. [902217] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): Patients in Kent are experiencing a winter crisis as a result of years of under-investment in our NHS. Many are having to be treated on trolleys in corridors for cases of winter flu and other viruses, creating a significant challenge for local health services. What assurance can the Prime Minister offer residents in Dartford that the reforms and extra investment set out by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will make that inadequate care a thing of the past, and will he visit Darent Valley hospital in Dartford with me?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that matter and I am deeply sorry for those receiving inadequate care in his constituency. The previous Government left the NHS in a critical condition. We cannot deliver growth with record waiting lists and 2.8 million economically inactive people. Through our plan for change we will invest in NHS diagnostic centres. I will, of course, consider his invitation.

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

**Ed Davey** (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): May I echo the words of the Prime Minister about President Biden? I hope that his team and the team of President-elect Trump can work together to bring the peace in Gaza that we so desperately need so that the hostages can be released, we can get aid in, and the killing can stop.

As the hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) just said, patients are suffering through the worst NHS winter crisis on record. Last month alone, 54,000 people waited more than 12 hours in A&E. Over 63,000 were stuck in ambulances for over an hour before they could even get into hospital. There is no doubt that the flu season has made the winter crisis worse, but we see these winter crises year after year, following years of neglect of the NHS by the Conservatives. NHS leaders say that we will never put an end to these winter crises unless we fix the crisis in social care. I asked the Prime Minister this question last week, and I was disappointed by his reply, so I will try again. Will he scrap the three-year timetable that he has given the Casey commission so that we can fix social care this year, implementing reforms by the end of this year at the latest?

**The Prime Minister:** We are encouraged by the talks towards a ceasefire. I think the whole House would urge all to come to an agreement and have the hostages released. We all understand the absolute torture that their families are going through every single minute of every single day that this continues. We hope that there can be progress there.

In relation to the NHS, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the Conservative party left it on its knees—[*Interruption.*] There is no point groaning. It is absolutely disgraceful that the NHS was left in the state that it was—absolutely disgraceful. We are investing to turn that around; we are reforming to turn that around. We are, within that reform, dealing with social care. I set out the timetable to him last week and he knows how it is set out.

**Ed Davey:** I continue to be disappointed by the Prime Minister's position on social care, and I am going to keep coming back to this issue, because unless we fix it, we will not fix the NHS.

Turning to the economy, though, I have an idea for the Chancellor to grow the economy. As President-elect Trump prepares to take office next week, there are reports that a number of wealthy, high-skilled Americans are looking to come to the UK for fear of what he will do to their country. However, because the Conservatives so broke the immigration system, many of them are finding that there is no visa they can apply for. I know that the Prime Minister is rightly seeking to reduce immigration from the record highs of the Conservatives, but does he agree that if people like this want to come to

our country—to bring their money and their skills, so that we can grow our economy and pay for our public services—they should be able to?

**The Prime Minister:** We welcome all investment into the United Kingdom. I am very pleased to have had record investment in the time we have been in office, and continue to welcome investors and investment to this country. The right hon. Member is absolutely right that the last Government lost control of immigration, as they lost control of health, the economy, the borders and everything else. Of course, it was the Leader of the Opposition who was championing the driving up of the numbers. We will bring those numbers down, get immigration back under control and encourage investment.

Q7. [902218] **Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Dental deserts mean that routine dental check-ups and treatment are often unavailable in local communities. In my constituency, we have had a dedicated space for a dental practice in the Blackburn partnership centre since 2018, but NHS Lothian has been unable to secure a dental practice. What steps will the Prime Minister take to work with devolved Governments to improve access to local NHS dentists across the UK?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue, which shows the state of public services under the SNP. If you can believe it, Mr Speaker, a third of Scots struggle to access dentistry, and a quarter of Scottish children start primary school with tooth decay—that is really shocking. Clearly, there is much more that the SNP should be doing. [*Interruption.*] The SNP should be ashamed. When a quarter of children are starting school with tooth decay, that is nothing to crow about; it is something to be ashamed of. Here, we are delivering an additional 700,000 appointments and reforming the contract, and of course we will work with the Scottish Government to improve the health of children in Scotland.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): Given President Trump's antipathy to the EU, how does the Prime Minister hope to obtain a trade deal for the whole United Kingdom in circumstances where the trade laws affecting part of the United Kingdom—namely Northern Ireland—are the EU's trade laws, and where the laws governing goods and standards for what can be imported are EU laws? In those circumstances, how can a deal be obtained for the whole United Kingdom, or is the Prime Minister only interested in a deal that would apply to GB, thereby further ostracising Northern Ireland from the Union?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. and learned Member knows that controls apply only to EU goods moving into Great Britain. The overwhelming majority of goods moving between Northern Ireland and Great Britain will continue to enjoy unfettered access to Great Britain indefinitely. The hon. and learned Member has made much of mutual enforcement; the reality is that this is mutual agreement. I know that he has his proposal, but I think his proposal would lead in the end to a hard border—something that has been rejected across this House on many, many occasions, and for good reason.

**Q8.** [902219] **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): In the general election campaign, Labour leadership promised that if we won, we would step in and save the Grangemouth refinery, retain those jobs and invest in the refinery's future. Six months later, that has not happened yet. If the refinery closes, thousands of jobs will be lost and Scotland's national security will become massively weaker. Now that we are in power, I know that the Government should use that power to intervene and save the refinery jobs, protect Scotland and deliver on the promise to build Grangemouth for the future. Will the Prime Minister do that?

**The Prime Minister:** This is a really important point, because before July there was no plan at all to support the workers at Grangemouth. Within weeks, and importantly, we announced £100 million for a growth deal, and we are jointly funding Project Willow to find a viable long-term future. It is a really serious point, I take it very seriously and we will do everything we can to make sure that viable long-term future is there for the workers, their communities and all who rely on it.

**Q2.** [902212] **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): The Russian invasion of Ukraine has led to the emergence of bacteria that are severely resistant to multiple antibiotics, and this is now seriously delaying the return of injured soldiers to the frontline. We know that, just like Mr Putin, these superbugs do not respect national borders. It is only a matter of time until we start to detect them in our NHS hospitals, and we know that antimicrobial resistance is a huge challenge facing us at the moment. Will the Prime Minister consider supporting the Ukrainian war effort by providing rapid diagnostic tests that can be used in the field and in civilian hospitals, which would not only enable us to diagnose and treat these resistant infections more quickly, returning soldiers back to the frontline more quickly, but provide valuable surveillance data to help global public health and protect our NHS from these dangerous bacteria?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Member for raising this, and he knows our support for Ukraine is ironclad. We are funding NHS doctors and nurses to work closely with their Ukrainian counterparts to share best practice, including how to prevent the spread of infections and AMR. Through the World Health Organisation, we are also strengthening Ukraine's health system to provide better care, and we will continue to do so.

**Q10.** [902221] **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): The Employment Rights Bill is urgently needed, especially given the exploitation of gig workers such as retail assistants employed through apps, with vital rights denied and staff being charged a premium should they want to be paid on time. Insecure work denies workers their rights, but the TUC has said it also costs the economy around £10 billion a year. So will the Prime Minister agree with me that having a single status of worker will help end such abusive practices, give workers security and significantly benefit the economy?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this. I believe everyone is entitled to fair, flexible and secure working. That is why we introduced our Employment Rights Bill, which is the biggest upgrade

to workers' rights in a generation. It includes measures that will end the scandal of fire and rehire, prevent exploitative zero-hour contracts and introduce basic rights for more workers from day one—secure wages, secure jobs and ensuring workers have the rights that they deserve at work.

**Q3.** [902213] **Mr Peter Bedford** (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Age UK Leicestershire has done a sterling job over the last few months in supporting pensioners who have lost the winter fuel payment as a result of the Government's Budget. It now faces a staggering £400,000 increase in its costs as a result of the increase in national insurance. What advice can the Prime Minister give to charities such as Age UK that now have to decide whether to cut jobs or slash services to some of the most vulnerable in society?

**The Prime Minister:** The advantage, I suppose, of the Leader of the Opposition having no policies is that Opposition Members can say completely contradictory things without breaching their policy. They want the benefits of the Budget, but none of the tough measures to support the Budget. We have taken the decision in relation to pension credit and pension allowances, but because of our commitment to the triple lock, there will be an upgrade in April of this year of £460 for everyone. What I notice is that before Christmas, the shadow Chancellor said that the triple lock is "unsustainable"—unsustainable—so that is their position. Pensions are going up under this Government because we are committing to the triple lock; the triple lock being unsustainable is their argument.

**Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): Later this month, my constituency will mark the anniversary of the tragic murder of Holly Newton. Will the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary look urgently at the calls from Holly's mother Micala Trussler to lower the age at which a person can be recognised as a victim of domestic abuse?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that tragic case; it is a really important issue. We have seen an increase in violence in teenage relationships in the last decade, and I have been continually shocked by research that shows there is abuse in relationships at a younger and younger age. We do need to look at the earliest opportunity at how we properly protect girls.

**Q5.** [902216] **Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): Since becoming the Labour leader, has the Prime Minister ever discussed or communicated with Philippe Sands KC about the Chagos islands?

**The Prime Minister:** No.

**Q14.** [902225] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): York is an incredible city, but demands on tourist destinations such as York, which receives over 9 million visitors and 1.7 million overnight stays, place significant pressure on local public services and housing used as short-term holiday lets. What steps will the Prime Minister take to equip local authorities to better balance the benefits of tourism against the additional costs to our communities?



**The Prime Minister:** Tourism is vital to our economy, particularly in cities like York. Places can already choose to introduce a voluntary levy on overnight stays. Our focus is on supporting industry, including by providing a 40% relief for retail, hospitality and leisure properties and permanently lowering their rates from next April.

Q9. [902220] **Matt Vickers** (Stockton West) (Con): Margaret from Stockton is furious. Stockton's Labour council is axing her weekly bin collections, scrapping free high-street parking and closing her local recycling centre, all the while employing a ridiculous number of people on £100,000 salaries. But she is even more furious because it is taking on another one: behind closed doors—probably in a darkened room—it has created a new interim role for the managing director's best mate on 900 quid a day. It has never been approved by the council and it has never been advertised as a job. Margaret is right to be angry, isn't she?

**The Prime Minister:** I am sure that Margaret would be pleased to see the incredible investment going into the area and the 4,000 jobs that are growing the economy. The state of our local councils was left completely damaged by the last Government. She knows that, and everybody knows that.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Grahame Morris.

Q13. [902224] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): You can never have too many Morrises, Mr Speaker.

To their credit, in their first Budget the Labour Government transferred the mineworkers' pension scheme investment reserve fund, benefiting nearly 4,000 former miners and miners' widows in my constituency. However, almost 700 British Coal staff superannuation scheme pensioners in my constituency were excluded. Will the Prime Minister correct that injustice and ensure that BCSSS beneficiaries—many of them are now elderly and in very poor health—are treated equally to their co-workers in the MPS?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his dedicated campaigning on this issue. I am proud that the Government have overturned a historic injustice, boosting the pensions of over 100,000 former mineworkers. We are working closely with the coal staff scheme trustees to consider the proposal, and I will ensure that the Industry Minister keeps him fully updated.

Q11. [902222] **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): My constituents on the Isle of Wight are entirely reliant on foreign-owned, debt-laden, unregulated ferry companies for essential travel, but public transport in the United Kingdom, such as buses trains and Scottish ferries, is regulated and subsidised. Does the Prime Minister agree that the Isle of Wight anomaly must come to an end? Will the Government intervene to protect passengers from excessive ferry prices and bad services?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Member is right that the ferry services for his constituents have simply not been good enough. I know that both he and my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley)

share a commitment to ensuring that their constituents receive a better service. The Maritime Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), has met the ferry and hovercraft operators, the leader of the council and other stakeholders. There will be further meetings, and I will ensure that the hon. Member is fully informed by the Minister on progress on this issue for his constituents.

**Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): This year marks the 850th anniversary of my home city of Glasgow. One of the key aims of the celebration is to speed up ambitions around the city council's grand challenge of tackling poverty and inequality and increasing prosperity and opportunity—themes that chime clearly with this Government's agenda. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Glasgow on this milestone, and does he agree that people make Glasgow?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Glasgow is a great city, and I am very happy to join her in congratulating the people of Glasgow on the 850th anniversary. They have made, and will continue to make, a huge contribution to this country.

Q12. [902223] **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): Today marks 467 days in captivity for Avinatan Or, just one of the more than 100 hostages that Hamas still cruelly hold. Avinatan is my age and has his whole life ahead of him. I felt the raw pain of his family when his mum Ditza, a British citizen, shared her story with me as part of the "twin with a hostage" campaign. Will the Prime Minister assure me that he is doing everything in his power to ensure that all the hostages are returned, so that Avinatan can be at home where he belongs with Ditza and his girlfriend Noa?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this case. It is appalling that Hamas continue to detain Avinatan and other hostages, including Emily Damari. I know that the hon. Gentleman has spent time with the families—it is nothing short of torture what they are going through. We will do absolutely everything in our power to ensure that we make progress to bring these hostages home—I am sure that I speak for everybody in the House. We will do everything to try to make sure that we get those hostages home.

**Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): My constituent Richard Lee has waited over 43 years for answers about the disappearance of his daughter Katrice from a military base in Germany in 1981. She was just two years old. The Royal Military Police, the Ministry of Defence and successive Governments have failed to get the answers that he deserves, throwing up barrier after barrier to justice. Will the Prime Minister meet Richard and me to finally give this Hartlepool veteran a way forward to uncover the truth about the disappearance of his daughter?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this deeply distressing case. Our thoughts and sympathies are with Richard Lee and his family. The Defence Serious Crime Unit continues to appeal for new evidence in this case, and I will make sure that he has a meeting with the appropriate Minister to discuss progress.



## Foot and Mouth Disease

12.37 pm

**Dr Neil Hudson** (Epping Forest) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs if he will make a statement on the Government's emergency contingency response to the recent confirmation of foot and mouth disease in Germany?

**The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner)**: The whole House will be aware of the concern across rural communities about the potential threat of foot and mouth disease. It is a severe, highly contagious viral disease of livestock that can have a significant economic impact, and a truly devastating effect on farming and rural communities when outbreaks occur, as we know from history.

I assure the House that the UK is currently free of foot and mouth disease, and has been since 2007. But following confirmation on 10 January, foot and mouth disease in the German state of Brandenburg, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has taken rapid action to protect the UK, including suspending the commercial import of susceptible animals from Germany and restricting personal imports of animal products from across the European Union.

I assure the House that the Government will do whatever it takes to protect our nation's farmers from the risk posed by foot and mouth. We have increased risk levels in the UK to medium. Last night, the chief veterinary officer and I spoke directly with the German Federal Minister and his officials. The Government have taken decisive and immediate action. The import of cattle, pigs and sheep from Germany has been stopped to protect farmers and their livelihoods. We will not hesitate to add additional countries to the list if the disease spreads. I can inform the House that this morning the chief veterinary officer has confirmed that while Germany's surveillance continues to be ongoing, it has not as yet detected any further cases.

Foot and mouth disease guidance is available on gov.uk and livestock farmers are urged to be extra-vigilant and report any suspect disease to the Animal and Plant Health Agency immediately. The UK chief veterinary officer is also urging livestock keepers to remain vigilant to the clinical signs of FMD. I reiterate that there are no cases in the UK currently. I also reassure the House that FMD poses no risk to human or food safety but it is a highly contagious viral disease in cattle, sheep, pigs and other cloven-hoofed animals. Livestock keepers should therefore be absolutely rigorous about their biosecurity.

The Government are absolutely focused on responding to the animal disease threats we face, protecting animal health and welfare. Upholding high biosecurity standards is paramount for protecting and promoting food production and food safety, both animal and human, and supporting our economy and trade. That is why we have invested a further £200 million in the UK's main research laboratory testing facilities at Weybridge to bolster protection against animal disease.

While we stand ready to protect our livestock from the threat of foot and mouth and other exotic diseases, we also offer our support to our European neighbours

as they face this threat to their livestock, farming and rural communities. I can assure the House that the Government will be decisive and take the necessary action to protect our farmers from foot and mouth disease.

**Dr Hudson**: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I declare a strong personal and professional interest. As a veterinary surgeon I supervised some of the animal culls in the 2001 outbreak, witnessing sights I never want to see again.

The confirmation on 10 January of foot and mouth disease in Germany, with subsequent slaughter and movement restrictions, is sending shockwaves around Europe and the UK. We have requested this urgent question as no statement was provided to the House on Monday or Tuesday. The shadow DEFRA Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), is unable to be with us today as she is at the LAMMA show in Birmingham speaking to agricultural manufacturers and farmers.

In 2001, the foot and mouth outbreak resulted in more than 6 million animals being culled and cost £12.8 billion in today's prices. It devastated the farming community, and farmers want reassurance that action is being taken to protect our borders, their livestock and their livelihoods.

The mental health impacts of foot and mouth cannot be overstated. Can the Minister reassure us that the announced movement restrictions are fully in place for animals and products coming to the UK from the affected area? Will the Government think about extending the ban to personal imports of meat and milk products unless accompanied by veterinary documentation? Can the Minister update us on the work tracing possible movements of products from Germany? What advice is there about movements of people and vehicles from the area in terms of fomite transmission of the virus? And, heaven forbid, if foot and mouth ever enters the United Kingdom, what is the situation regarding vaccine supply and potential deployment?

Finally, I pay tribute to the chief vets and the veterinary and animal officers and scientists and officials at the Animal and Plant Health Agency, who do so much to keep our country biosecure. This foot and mouth disease wake-up call is yet more evidence that the Government must now commit to fully fund the redevelopment of the APHA HQ in Weybridge. I urge the Government from the bottom of my heart to fully fund that redevelopment, to make sure that the burning pyres of slaughtered animals, as well as the economic and mental health devastation of foot and mouth disease, remain resolutely confined to the history books.

**Daniel Zeichner**: I fully appreciate the expertise and passion the hon. Gentleman brings to this subject; he knows of what he speaks. I hope I made it clear in my initial reply just how seriously the Government take these issues. I spoke to him earlier this morning ahead of a Delegated Legislation Committee to make it clear that we would work on a cross-party basis to tackle this, should it come to our shores.

I will try to address the hon. Member's questions, particularly those around vaccination, because that is always raised and is always of concern.

[Daniel Zeichner]

We are absolutely ready in case that is a control that we need to implement. According to the general advice with regard to control measures, if an outbreak were to occur in the UK, vaccination is a control option that would be considered by DEFRA and devolved Administrations at the outset, in addition to culling and immediate movement controls. I can assure the shadow Minister that the UK vaccine bank holds vaccines for a range of foot and mouth disease serotypes. I can also assure him that there is good, close working with the devolved Administrations on this matter and that we are working in harmony.

On the movement of personally carried goods, I remind the shadow Minister that this Government strengthened those controls at the borders. I am confident that we are doing everything possible at the moment to ensure that we are following the right procedures, given the risk assessments that have been carried out. Our sincere hope is obviously that this does not extend beyond the Brandenburg area, but we are absolutely ready to deal with those issues.

On the investment at Weybridge, as I have said, we have committed an initial £200 million. This is a debate we have been having for some time, and I am afraid that we are working with the resources we have now. However, I am confident that we have a very good set of procedures in place to tackle any potential incursion.

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) for his concern and passion on this subject. Like him, I know only too well the devastation that was caused in 2001. Of course, he previously had the privilege of representing a large part of what is now the Carlisle constituency.

Cumbria was the worst affected part of the country in 2001, with 30% of the culled cattle being from Cumbrian farms. Will the Minister elaborate on the steps that are being taken to ensure that our farmers and their livestock are protected ahead—God forbid—of any potential outbreak?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for the concern she has rightly shown. As I said at the outset, we are well aware of the concern that people feel. However, they should be reassured that we have very good tracing facilities these days; the technologies have improved. What is particularly important is that we are in close contact with our German colleagues, who are sharing advice regularly. Everything that can be done is being done, but I absolutely recognise people's concerns.

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

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I confess that all of us in Westmorland and across rural Britain feel a sense of terror at this news, as we recall the devastation and horror of the 2001 outbreak. I will never forget the looming sense of dread and threat as the disease got closer to our farms, or the dread when the disease was diagnosed and whole herds and flocks were slaughtered by those who had cared for them; nor will I forget the burning fires on the hillsides of the bodies of slaughtered animals, or the deep trauma that affected all our communities, but especially our children. We must do everything to avoid a repeat.

Can the Minister explain why this outbreak was notified on Friday, yet DEFRA issued instructions to prevent imports from the affected areas only yesterday, when countries such as Mexico and South Korea were able to act over the weekend? Does he now acknowledge the urgent need to invest in the APHA and the new laboratory, and undo the delay of the previous Government? Does he accept that the failure of the previous Government—and, so far, of his Government—to sign a veterinary and phytosanitary agreement with the EU increases the risks to biosecurity and to British farmers, and will he act swiftly to put that right? Finally, will he meet urgently the noble Lord Curry, who headed the inquiry after the 2001 outbreak, so that we are ready and have learned all the lessons of previous failures, and so that our farms, rural communities and animal welfare are protected at all costs?

**Mr Speaker:** Order. This matter is very important. My area had the first case of foot and mouth detected in that year, so I know all about it. However, we must stick to the times that have been allocated.

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am always happy to speak to Lord Curry, who brings huge expertise and knowledge.

I will just say to the hon. Gentleman that there was no delay—essentially, as soon as we were informed, we put the appropriate processes in place, and staff at border control points were issued instructions to hold goods at the border. Everything was done as quickly as possible.

I hear the hon. Gentleman's point about our relationship with the German Government. I know the German Minister personally, and I spoke to him yesterday. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are getting every co-operation needed from the German Government.

**Lizzi Collinge** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): In 2001, I lived in north Cumbria and I will never, ever forget the sight of burning livestock in my friends' fields. Can the Minister assure me that my farmers in Morecambe and Lunesdale, who by and large are livestock farmers, will never have to face that terrible scene again and that we will do everything we possibly can to ensure that foot and mouth does not spread to our country?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her comments and for her account of the effect the disease had on her constituents. The purpose of my response to the question today is to give reassurance to people that we have very, very high quality officials working very, very hard to make sure we do everything we can to prevent such an outbreak happening again.

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

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): As well as noting my own entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, I should tell the House that my wife is a practising veterinary surgeon who is occasionally contracted to provide local veterinary official services to the APHA.

I, too, remember the events of 2001 and I remember, having just been elected, the debates we had in this House. We said that we must always learn the lessons and never forget, but in truth, frankly, we have. The

extent to which we are exposed today is something for which responsibility is shared across the parties. The state of the APHA headquarters in Weybridge is a disgrace and it is now an urgent disgrace. Hopefully, this is a bullet that we will dodge, but if we do, we know there is also the risk of African swine fever, bluetongue and avian influenza all coming. Is this the point where, across the House, we can all agree on the importance of biosecurity and the importance of funding it?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his point. I think we all know how important biosecurity is, and that is why the Government committed a further £200 million for that very important facility in Weybridge.

**Mr Richard Quigley** (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm what mitigation funding has been made available for farms that may be affected? Will he commit to look urgently at the provision of an abattoir on the Isle of Wight, because we do not currently have one?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question—good try. At the moment, we are talking about an outbreak in Germany. Should there be—obviously, we are doing everything we can to prevent it—an outbreak in the UK, we will come back with further proposals, but at the moment we are working hard to make sure that that does not happen.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): Could the Minister confirm, given the seriousness of the issues, that when in doubt the precautionary principle will come to the fore, there will be urgency and the proper decisions will be taken? He mentioned working with the devolved Administrations. Given the shared land border on the island of Ireland and the trade there, can he confirm what conversations he has had or may be planning to have with the Government in Dublin?

**Daniel Zeichner:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We will, of course, take every precaution and apply the precautionary principle. We treat Northern Ireland in the same way as the other devolved Administrations. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh) will be having conversations later today.

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I welcome the urgent question, as the news is a worry to farmers in my constituency. Is the Minister able to share with the House more details about the funding available from his Department to help prevent new animal diseases?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I thank my hon. Friend for her point and her concern. We have an extensive set of facilities and agencies who are tasked with protecting our country on these issues. I have every confidence in the chief veterinary officer and her officials in the APHA, subject to the issues that have been raised around long-term funding. We have good protections in place and people should have confidence in them.

**Dr Ben Spencer** (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Yet again, we rely on the fantastic people at the Animal and Plant Health Agency, which is based in New Haw in my constituency, despite its slightly confusing name.

Will the Minister join me in thanking the people who work there, and does he agree that it urgently needs investment to improve the facilities? I do not think he has visited the APHA. Will he join me on a tour as soon as we can arrange it to see for himself the state it is in and what improvements are urgently needed?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am always grateful for invitations from hon. Members and feel that I am permanently on tour, but the hon. Gentleman is right that I have not yet had the opportunity to visit, although the Secretary of State has. Last week, when I was at a conference in York, very senior officials from the APHA gave me a very detailed briefing on the work they do. I share in the thanks to those people who play a huge role in keeping our country safe.

**Louise Jones** (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): As a child, I distinctly remember the creeping fear on my family's farms as foot and mouth moved ever closer. I realised that even as a child, and I feel sick just thinking that we could ever go back there. Many farmers in my constituency have repeatedly raised their concerns over infectious diseases entering the UK. Please can the Minister assure me, and them, that we are doing everything to take this very seriously, and that we have contingency plans in place?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reflecting on the awful experiences of 20 years ago. I assure her that we have excellent people, to whom I have just referred, who are working extremely hard to minimise the risk of any further outbreak. We are doing everything we can to prevent that from happening.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the Minister not agree that it is preposterous that Northern Ireland has been excluded from the UK ban on imports from Germany because of the outbreak of foot and mouth? Does he agree that that is the tip of the iceberg in respect of the impact the Windsor framework and the protocol continue to have on our agrifood industry in Northern Ireland? Since he thinks—and rightly so—that it is essential to protect GB farms from potentially devastating impacts, why does he believe that Northern Ireland farms are not as important?

**Daniel Zeichner:** Northern Ireland farms are just as important. In Northern Ireland, the controls will apply to meat and live animals moving from a 3 km protection zone and a 10 km surveillance zone surrounding the affected premises in Germany. Those products cannot be moved to Northern Ireland.

**Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister outline what measures are being taken to ensure that no animals infected in the outbreak in Germany end up in this country?

**Daniel Zeichner:** This is an unusual outbreak, in a sense. It is a very small herd of 20 water buffalo. What is unknown to the German authorities at the moment is how they got infected in the first place. Extensive work is going on in Germany to try to understand that. The difference from 20 years ago is that we now have much better science to be able to trace where it may have come from. Extensive work is going on across Europe, because



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it is a threat to the entire continent. I can assure my hon. Friend that every avenue is being explored to try to make sure that we understand how this has happened and that it goes no further.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): As a farmer's daughter, I fully remember the sickening impact of the last foot and mouth outbreaks across Somerset and Dorset, particularly on farmers' mental health. The culling restrictions resulted in 73% of farmers experiencing depression and anxiety following the last outbreak. Now, almost one half of the farming community are already experiencing anxiety. What plans do the Government have to support farmers who may be impacted by this disease or any other biosecurity risk?

**Daniel Zeichner**: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I know she takes these issues very seriously and we have discussed them before. Let me be clear: this is an outbreak in Germany at the moment. We are doing everything we can to ensure it does not extend into our country. Of course people are concerned and worried. Should it develop further, which we are absolutely determined to make sure does not happen, then we will look at further measures to help and support people, but we are not at that stage.

**Claire Hughes** (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his responses. It is very reassuring that the seriousness of the situation is felt across the House and across the country. He talked about working with the devolved Administrations. Will he say more about how he will work with the Welsh Government in particular to address this issue?

**Daniel Zeichner**: I can assure my hon. Friend that we have an extremely close relationship with the Welsh Government. The Rural Affairs Minister, Huw Irranca-Davies, and I speak frequently—indeed, we spoke to each other only a few days ago, at the Oxford farming conference—and we are in regular contact to discuss issues such as these. In anything that we do, we will be working together on an “entire United Kingdom” basis.

**John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): With some of the most productive grassland in the UK, Dumfries and Galloway is not worried but terrified by this outbreak. I am reassured to know that we are doing what we can, but it is a very difficult problem to solve. Can the Minister reassure me that the Republic of Ireland will not be the unlocked back door through which this dread disease returns to this country?

**Daniel Zeichner**: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's appreciation of the complexities that we face, but it is in everyone's interests to ensure that we stop this, and we are all co-operating closely. The veterinary officials have a very good network, and they are working closely together. No one wants this to extend further.

**James Naish** (Rushcliffe) (Lab): As the son of a farmer, I remember only too well waking up in the early morning and going downstairs to listen to Radio 4 in silence with my family as we heard about more and more animals being culled during the crisis in the early

2000s. What steps are being taken to engage the National Farmers Union and other trade bodies to prepare for any outbreak here in the UK?

**Daniel Zeichner**: I thank my hon. Friend for his concern and his recollections. Yesterday we held a roundtable to discuss the threat posed by bluetongue, and we are in constant dialogue with all those who have direct interests and expertise. We will be working in lockstep.

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): In his initial answer, the Minister talked about protecting the UK and spoke about our nation's farmers. He also advised farmers to consult gov.uk, which gives advice to Scottish, English and Welsh farmers but not to Northern Ireland farmers. May I ask him why he has abandoned them, given that the last outbreak, in 2001, cost the Northern Ireland economy £24.2 million? One small region in Germany cannot export to Northern Ireland. Does the Minister not agree that there should be a complete ban on the import of German products to Northern Ireland as well as the rest of the United Kingdom?

**Daniel Zeichner**: We stand with farmers throughout the United Kingdom. The circumstances are slightly different, for reasons that the hon. Gentleman will understand, which is why we have to provide appropriate advice, but we are working in tandem and lockstep with colleagues across Europe to beat this horrible disease.

**Mr Luke Charters** (York Outer) (Lab): It is the critical work of the Animal and Plant Health Agency in Weybridge, which I visited recently, that will prevent foot and mouth from reaching our shores. The £200 million for the agency that the Government have announced is welcome, but will my hon. Friend commit himself to reviewing its funding, particularly in the event of multiple concurrent diseases?

**Daniel Zeichner**: We constantly keep under review the resources that are available to enable us to tackle all these issues. On the basis of a number of questions today, I shall be happy to visit Weybridge at the earliest opportunity.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): Unfortunately, as the Minister will know, foot and mouth disease looms large in the memories of many Shropshire farmers. Talking of visits—this is a genuine point—I wonder whether the Minister, and indeed the Secretary of State, would consider visiting Harper Adams University in my constituency, which, as he will also know, is the top agricultural university in Europe. I mention that because it has veterinary experts with specific expertise in this disease and others.

As we heard from the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), more than 6 million pigs, cattle and sheep were lost in 2001 and 2007. The Minister mentioned biodiversity. Can he update the House on illegal meat imports and checks at the border, and the implementation of the border target operating model?

**Daniel Zeichner**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his invitation; I shall add him to my list. The border checks involve a complicated set of issues, but one of the Brexit



benefits, if you like, is the existence of those checks, and I am satisfied that they are providing a level of security that should give people confidence. As I said in an earlier answer, we have strengthened the controls on personal imports. It is always a challenge to protect any area, but we are in a better position than colleagues in mainland Europe.

**Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): It is good to see cross-party support for increased investment in Weybridge, which has long been needed, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned biosecurity, and we know that a great deal of illegally imported meat is coming through our ports. That is a huge biosecurity risk, and an even greater risk if there is foot and mouth on the continent. As well as investing in Weybridge and improving those facilities, can we look at how we can resource the port authorities properly to catch all this illegally imported meat?

**Daniel Zeichner:** That is an important point. We will try to do all that we can to ensure that illegal imports are intercepted and stopped. I am delighted to observe the outbreak of cross-party consensus on the need for more investment, and I hope there will also be an outbreak of consensus on how to fund it.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): My constituency was one of the most significantly impacted by the 2001 outbreak. Virtually every hoofed animal in Dumfriesshire was slaughtered, and the smoke from the pyre hung over the Annan valley in particular for days. A large part of the market in livestock in my constituency comes from Longtown market, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns), which was a source of the previous outbreak. Will the Minister ensure that we work closely with the Scottish Government, given that there is a significant amount of cross-border movement of animals that needs to be properly identified and regulated?

**Daniel Zeichner:** The right hon. Gentleman speaks with passion and paints a vivid picture of that dismal period, which, sadly, I remember well. I can give him an absolute assurance that—as he will know from his time in government—the veterinary officers work very closely together, particularly on an official level. This is an entirely shared endeavour, and we will do everything we can to ensure that that there is the close co-operation that is needed.

**Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I am a dairy farmer, and the devastating outbreak of foot and mouth more than 20 years ago was on my doorstep. We were lucky, as a family farm, but sadly others within my farming community in Wales were not. The outbreak was also a food security issue, as it was understood to have derived from food waste fed to pigs. What lessons have the UK Government learnt from that outbreak to enable them to secure our food chains better and keep our livestock and food supplies safe?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I recognise the hurt that the hon. Lady recalls from that dreadful time. A great deal of work was done in the light of those events, and lessons have been learnt; for instance, technology has changed

and improved. I will not go into all those lessons, which are probably worthy of a longer debate, but it is important for us to act on them, because we do not want a repeat of what happened in 2001.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Like many other Members, I clearly remember the events of 2001, not least because all the cattle and sheep on our family farm—my father's farm in Berwickshire—were slaughtered. The emotional trauma will stay with farming communities for many years to come. I am reassured that this Government are engaging with the Scottish Government, but is the Minister also speaking to NFU Scotland and to local authorities, to ensure that they are able to support farming communities in the best way possible?

**Daniel Zeichner:** The hon. Gentleman has spoken with passion and conviction about that dreadful time, and I fully respect that. We were notified of the outbreak on Friday; today is Wednesday. Of course we are ready to move to the next stage should it be necessary, but at this point the key priority must be ensuring that we keep the disease out of our country, and that is where the attention is currently focused. In the dismal eventuality that we have to move to measures within our country, we will of course work very closely with everyone who needs to be involved.

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I am sure that my farmers, like me, will be hugely grateful to know that the ban will operate with cross-party support; our farmers are more important than party politics. Back in 2001, I was the Liberal Democrat candidate for the Totnes constituency. The amount of communication with farmers before the outbreak was the only thing that made it easier for them to understand what was going on, because one could not go on a farm once it had started. May I encourage the Minister to communicate with farmers as much as he can during this very difficult time?

**Daniel Zeichner:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her recollections of that time. I reiterate that we are trying to ensure that foot and mouth disease does not arrive on our shores. Should that happen, we will move to another phase. We are not at that point yet, and it is important to reassure people that we have excellent measures and excellent people in place. They are working very hard to ensure that we do not get to that point.

**Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Government's efforts in bringing us up to speed today, but also in imposing the import ban. I recognise that the ban applies to products from Germany, but does it capture products that may originate there but for which the point of import is outside Germany? What steps are the Government taking to proactively increase spot testing or screening across the country, so that we can get ahead of any possible outbreak?

**Daniel Zeichner:** We are applying all the rules that we can to ensure that we exclude German products at the moment, but there is quite a complex set of supply chains within the European Union. The key priority is live animals. There is nothing fortuitous about bluetongue, but there have been restrictions on movements for some

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time, so we are probably better protected than we might have been. We cannot say for sure that nothing will move across the continent and come into the country, which is why it is very important that people are vigilant. Should foot and mouth disease cross the channel, speed will be of the essence to ensure that we shut it down. However, from talking to the chief vet and her officials and my conversations with German colleagues, I am confident that everything that can be done is being done. I hope that reassures the hon. Lady.

**Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): I am sure that nobody in Devon will forget the horror of 2001, when half the farms in the county were affected by foot and mouth. Does the situation in Germany provide an impetus for the Minister to move forward with securing a veterinary deal with the European Union?

**Daniel Zeichner**: We do not need any extra impetus; the Government have committed to get a better deal. What I can say to the hon. Lady is that the relationship with our German colleagues is excellent at the moment, and they are giving us the full co-operation that we need.

**Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): The outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Germany is a timely reminder of the livestock diseases that threaten the UK every day. The Minister has said that he will take every precaution available to him, so will he use this opportunity to permanently ban all personal imports of meat, and to ensure that both the public health authorities and Border Force are resourced to tackle illegal meat importation?

**Daniel Zeichner**: The hon. Gentleman and I spoke frequently when he was in his previous role and I was in opposition, and he knows of what he speaks. We have strong measures in place. We strengthened them a few months ago, and I am confident that they are at the right level at the moment. Of course, there is always a case for further investment, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will support any measures that we bring forward.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): Does the Minister accept that the reason why he cannot provide national protection for Northern Ireland is that this House has surrendered the right to make such regulations? They cannot even be made in Stormont, because only a foreign Parliament is now entitled to make them. Therefore, we in Northern Ireland do not have the same protections for our farmers and their livelihoods that are afforded elsewhere. The ban is restricted to products coming from the affected areas in Germany. Given that context, will we see the absurdity that we have seen in response to bluetongue, whereby cattle and livestock from mainland Europe can transit through GB to Northern Ireland and, indeed, anywhere in the island of Ireland, despite the ban? Is that same loophole going to apply in this case?

**Daniel Zeichner**: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for continuing our dialogue on this issue. I do not recognise that loophole, and I can assure him that Northern Ireland will be fully protected, because that is what we are determined to do.

**David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Farmers in my constituency are very concerned by this news, as Powys was one of the hardest-hit regions in the 2001 outbreak and the trauma remains for the 2,000 livestock farmers affected. Can the Minister provide us with some further details on the conversations that he has had with the Welsh Government, and will he confirm that the Welsh Government will commit to working with local authorities?

**Daniel Zeichner**: I thank the hon. Gentleman not just for his question, but for the concern he expressed about his constituents, who suffered so grievously. The detailed conversations on these issues are conducted between the veterinary officers, who have a very close network. However, any political decisions that need to be made will be made by Ministers, and I have a very close relationship with Minister Iwan Rhys-Iwan. If further action is needed, we will work together to stop any further incursions.

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): In Shropshire, dairy and other livestock farmers have been having a torrid time recently, and they will have read this news with a sense of dread. I am also an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on food security, and we recently heard some eye-watering evidence from the border authorities at Dover about illegal meat imports and the threat that they pose to UK biosecurity. Can the Minister explain to the House what assessment he has made of the problems with that process, and what he intends to do to ensure that diseases such as foot and mouth do not arrive in the UK?

**Daniel Zeichner**: I thank the hon. Lady for expressing her concern. I reiterate the point I made earlier about the border controls that we have in place. I am afraid this has been a long-running issue, but we have much stronger border controls in place than we would have done in previous times. We are working hard with the port health authorities to make sure that we crack down on illegal imports of meat.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union. Indeed, I live on a farm on the Ards peninsula, where dairy farming and sheepmen surround me, and the impact on them would be great. For that reason, I want to ask the Minister a question. I can well remember the piles of dead animals and the traumatised farmers, who were all concerned, as they always are, about their animals—that was over 20 years ago, in 2001. The lessons were hard and well learned. Three other Northern Ireland MPs have asked similar questions, and I am the fourth. We need to clarify for farmers, my neighbours in Northern Ireland and all those who farm that there will be zero tolerance of products from Germany. Will the Minister confirm that a full, UK-wide report, including on Northern Ireland, will come to this House before any ban is lifted?

**Daniel Zeichner**: The hon. Gentleman speaks with passion on these issues. I can absolutely assure him that the measures in place to protect farmers in Northern Ireland are strong and will be good enough to make sure that we can protect people properly. Clearly, there is a slightly different set of arrangements in Northern Ireland, as he will be well aware. We have to respect

that, but we are getting absolute and total co-operation from our German colleagues. There will be no meat coming from affected parts of Germany to Northern Ireland.

## Local Government Reorganisation

1.19 pm

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister to make a statement on plans for local government reorganisation.

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** The English devolution White Paper sets out how this Government plan to deliver on our manifesto pledge to transfer power out of Westminster through devolution and to fix the foundations of local government. This Government's long-term vision is for simpler structures, making it clearer for residents who they should look to on local issues, with more strategic decisions to unlock growth and to deliver better services for local communities.

On 16 December 2024, I wrote to all councils in the remaining two-tier areas and neighbouring small unitaries to set out plans for a joint programme of devolution coupled with local government reorganisation. We acknowledge that for some areas the timing of elections affects their planning for devolution, particularly alongside reorganisation. To help to manage these demands, we will consider requests to postpone local elections, as has been the case in previous rounds. Where local elections are postponed, we will work with local areas to move elections to a new shadow unitary council as soon as possible. This is a very high bar, and rightly so.

The deadline for such requests was Friday 10 January. Today, my Department has published a list of all county and unitary councils who have made requests, including those who want to delay elections from 2025 to 2026. For the avoidance of doubt, this is the list of requests; it is not the final list that will be approved. We will consider these requests carefully and postpone elections only where there is a clear commitment to delivering both reorganisation and devolution to the ambitious timetable set out. While not all areas listed will go forward to be part of the devolution priority programme, we are grateful for the local leadership shown in submitting these requests, and a decision will be made in due course as soon as possible.

We welcome the large number of areas that have come forward seeking to join the devolution priority programme, reflecting our own ambition for greater coverage across England. This Labour Government were elected on a manifesto to push power out of Westminster and to relight the fires of our regions, and I am delighted that local leaders across England are sharing that ambition.

**David Simmonds:** Although it was not a manifesto commitment, the Government published their agenda for reorganising council structures in England before Christmas, and we support our local government colleagues who are clearly required to respond to that call from Government. With local elections scheduled to take place in May this year and councils already incurring significant costs arranging polling stations and electoral canvassing, and preparing to receive nominations and issue postal ballots, it is not surprising that many councils have acceded to the Government's expectation of a delay in these polls. After all, why incur millions in costs to local council tax payers for electing people to councils that are to be abolished shortly afterwards?



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However, there remains significant uncertainty about where and if those elections will be delayed. With deadlines looming for key points in the organisation of those elections, that uncertainty risks some wasted costs for council tax payers, so we on the Conservative Benches have a series of questions. We know that many of those councils are Conservative-run, and with Conservative councils charging on average £80 less per household than Labour ones and £21 less on average than Lib Dem ones, voters will want to understand the impact of the Government's reorganisation on their council tax and on their back pocket.

May I ask the Minister, first, what assessment has he made of the Boundary Commission's capacity to undertake the necessary reviews to ensure equal distribution of electors across the new local authorities? Can he give an indication to the House of when he will make decisions, so that local authorities will know whether they are preparing to organise elections and are willing to incur those costs or not? We know that a number of other announcements are in train, particularly the indication from the Deputy Prime Minister that areas currently setting a low level of council tax will be punished through revisions to the funding formula, so when can local authorities expect to know what impact such revisions to the funding formula will have? I look forward to informative answers from the Minister.

**Jim McMahon:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for those questions, and I am genuinely grateful for the spirit of consensus around the broader issue. I accept that there may be differences of opinion on pace, but we do not shy away from our ambition to see devolution experienced by the whole of England. I give a degree of credit to the previous Government for building out devolution in the north of England and the midlands, but surely we have to demonstrate that this project is not reserved for the north of England and the midlands. This is a project for the whole of England, and we are on with that.

Our determination to ensure that we deal with these structural changes early in the Parliament is clear, but that is shared by local government. It is important to say that although of course we will set the timetable and provide support on both the devolution priority programme and local reorganisation, it is for local areas to self-organise and to agree to be part of the programme. We are not mandating this; we are not forcing it. All the requests that we have had since Friday have been from areas who share our ambition.

The hon. Gentleman will know that it is sensible to take the approach that, if reorganisation is a genuine proposal—and the bar has to be high for that test—it is nonsense to have elections to bodies that simply will not exist. It is far better that we move at pace and create the new unitary councils and then hold elections at the earliest opportunity.

I am not going to get into the subject of council tax, partly because it is outside the scope of the hon. Gentleman's urgent question. Also, he was slightly mischievous in the way that he framed his remarks. On the point about capacity, however, it might be helpful if I lay out what the process will be. Local areas will make the request. We will issue statutory invitations at the end of the month, and areas will need to self-organise. It is not for the Boundary Commission or the Government to lay

down which plans come forward. It is for local areas to submit proposals to us, and at that point the Government will decide on the right proposals among what could be a number of options that come forward from local areas. Again, it will be for local areas to self-organise and make those proposals to us.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the shadow Minister for securing this important question; he has highlighted some key issues.

Sadly, we know that our councils are at breaking point. The Select Committee's first major inquiry is to look at local government finances, and we look forward to engaging with the Minister on it. It was reported that local authorities in England were facing £77.5 billion-worth of debt by the end of last year. Much of that is debt to central Government or from borrowing. Sadly, because of that, vital frontline services such as housing and social care are at breaking point. Residents cannot afford to be caught up in buck-passing or discussions about accountability if this reorganisation goes through, so can the Minister assure the House that residents will still have the same level of power and scrutiny over vital services during the reorganisations?

**Jim McMahon:** I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for those questions. What I hear from residents and even from councillors in two-tier areas is that, more often than not, local residents have no idea which council to go to in order to get the answers they need on local services. Reorganisation will provide efficiency savings in organisational costs that can be directed towards frontline services, which we believe are the priority for taxpayers. There should not simply be the cost, in many cases, of such services existing. We also believe that it is right, from a democratic accountability point of view, that residents have a clearer line of sight on which body to hold to account for local decisions.

On the point about local government finance, which we absolutely understand and accept, we have worked hard and I would say we have been relatively successful on rebalancing the funding crisis in local government. We have done that by providing £5 billion of new money, taking the total allocation to £69 billion. We cannot undo 14 years of damage in six months—it has been damaging over the 14 years—but we are now bridging to that multi-year settlement where we can really begin to repair the foundations. I think we have made progress on that.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): There is no doubt that local government needs significant reform, and Lib Dems are passionate about putting power into the hands of local communities, but we are concerned that rather than producing true devolution, these plans will end up as a top-down diktat from Whitehall. MPs and district councillors from areas including Devon, Surrey and the midlands have told me that submissions appear to have been



made without their district councils being involved or consulted, and without the opportunity to undertake consultation with residents and businesses. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that they engage meaningfully with every level of councils?

Councils such as Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, which I used to lead, face Hobson's choice. Tonight, councillors will be voting on whether to join proposals to their east or their west, neither of which reflect their urban needs or their distinct character. Or do they sit it out and hope for the best? What plans do the Government have to ensure that residents will have the democratic ability to decide on the right devolution plan for them? Can the Minister confirm, given that these plans will take more than a year to implement, that all the elections due in May 2025 will go ahead?

**Jim McMahon:** I do not want to disregard the good work of district councils in this conversation about reorganisation, and about redirecting money to operational costs on the frontline, so that taxpayers get better value for money and see the benefit in their local public services. I pay tribute to council officials, frontline workers and councillors, whether they are in unitaries, counties or districts, for their work. I just set out the view that the best way to achieve efficiency is by having more streamlined local government structures that enable money to go to the frontline.

On whether district councils will have a voice in the process, it is a fact that we have received requests for reorganisation, and statutory invitations go out at the end of the month, but it would be usual for the Government to be faced with a number of options for what those new boundaries might look like. The county might have a view about how many councils should be included in the reorganisation, and I suspect that districts might have a very different view.

It would be quite usual for a number of different proposals to come forward for a county. It is for the Government to try to strike a balance that takes into consideration identity, efficiency and having an anchor to the area that makes sense. We genuinely want this to be a collaborative process, so that we get the right outcome for local people.

**Mr Paul Foster** (South Ribble) (Lab): As the Minister is aware, I was a district council leader in Lancashire until 5 July, when I got the Avanti train down to Westminster. As I have said for many years, the challenge we face is that the two-tier system does not work. It confuses our residents. The Local Government Association's map of the different structures of local government in England is a mishmash, and it does not work. West Lancashire and South Ribble borough councils have put forward detailed proposals for local government reorganisation to the Minister, but the Conservative-run county council has not. My concern is that some elections will be cancelled and some will not. On the priority programme, will the Minister please consider enforcing the cancellation of all elections in places where he is moving forward quickly with reorganisation?

**Jim McMahon:** When my hon. Friend said he got the Avanti train down on 5 July, I think the Chamber was half expecting him to say that he had only just arrived, but he has been here for some time.

I know there are different views in Lancashire on what a good outcome looks like, and there are certainly different views on what a good process looks like, but I think there is a shared view that the time has come for devolution in Lancashire. When people look to Greater Manchester and the Liverpool city region, and see that Cumbria and Cheshire are organising to be part of the next stage, of course they want to be part of that. Lancashire is unique, in that we were already in discussions with it about its timetable and process. The level 2 agreement that is in place of course comes with investment, funding and other powers. Lancashire has agreed that by autumn, it will submit proposals to the Government that reconcile its organisational status; it will also bring forward a plan to move forward with a mayoral combined authority. Lancashire took the view that given that the timetable was already in place, it did not need to request that the election be cancelled.

To be clear, we absolutely see Lancashire as part of our priority work. It is critical. The prize for the north of England is completing the work on Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria, so that the whole north of England has mayoral devolution. That will be game-changing.

**Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

In the devolution White Paper, the Government set half a million people as the appropriate size for these new councils. Can the Minister therefore rule out creating big super-councils that represent more than a million people? Will he meet me to discuss devolution and local government reorganisation in Hertfordshire?

**Jim McMahon:** It is important that the Government set out the framework. We were very directive in the White Paper about our view on reorganisation and devolution. In every conversation we had with the LGA, the County Councils Network, the District Councils Network and others, we heard that the worst outcome would be the White Paper speaking to an issue without going close to clarifying what outcome we want. The response to the priority programme has been reflective of that clear direction.

We were up front in saying that, for efficiency, new unitary authorities should have a population of around 500,000, but we also made it clear that if the reorganisation went hand in hand with devolution, a degree of flexibility would be needed to make sure we balanced strategic oversight of the combined or strategic authority with the local identity and sense of belonging that people need. I also make it clear that it does not matter whether we are talking about councils going through reorganisation, or about existing councils and metropolitan authorities, be they in London or the north of England. Wherever they are, we expect councils to organise their neighbourhoods and communities, local public services and democratic engagement so that people feel more power in the place where they live.

**Daniel Francis** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): My residents in Crayford, in the London borough of Bexley, have their services provided by one council, but in many cases, residents on the same road have their services provided by two councils—by Kent county council and Dartford borough council—which causes

[Daniel Francis]

confusion, as the Minister said. Does he agree that the changes introduced in the English devolution Bill will make local government more effective and save money for those taxpayers?

**Jim McMahon:** That is exactly what this is about. This is the most ambitious reorganisation in England for at least 50 years, maybe longer. We need to avoid the sense that this is just rearranging the local government deckchairs. It is not about that. The devolution White Paper is ambitious, and that ambition is about wresting power from Westminster and Parliament and putting it in the hands of communities up and down the country. For far too long, power has been held in a very narrow way by a handful of people, at the exclusion of millions of people in this country. Frankly, people have had enough, so we have to find a different route.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am fortunate to work with two local authorities, Basingstoke and Deane borough council and Test Valley borough council, which, after many decades of careful stewardship, are debt-free and have significant assets on their balance sheets, to the benefit of their residents. What will the Minister do in this local government reorganisation to protect that legacy? Would it not be profoundly unfair if those many years of careful stewardship were wiped out by amalgamation with more profligate neighbouring councils?

**Jim McMahon:** It is not my intention to set one council against another. When areas begin to look at what new unitary boundaries might look like, they will need a view on identity, scale and achieving efficiency, and, ultimately, what construct will deliver good public services, be it adult social care, children's services or those neighbourhood services that, in many places, have been eroded to the point where people wonder if they exist at all.

We have to rebuild from the ground up. This process, regardless of a council's debt or financial status, is part of that rebuilding. Let us be honest: nobody in this Chamber, or in this Government, can put a number on this. We do not know what the outcome will be. If this is genuinely about local areas self-organising and presenting to Government their view of what a good outcome would be, we need to be open about that.

**Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): Local government reorganisation and full devolution is long overdue, and I believe it will bring many benefits to Norfolk and Norwich. In Norwich North, just as my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) said, one council might collect the bins on one side of the street, and another collects them on the other side. Building on the questions from Opposition Members, can the Minister reassure us that cities like Norwich will have a strong voice in this process, and will have their voices heard on the key economic drivers?

**Jim McMahon:** That is a very important point, and I pay tribute to MPs in Suffolk and Norfolk for the work that they have done in making the case for greater devolution of powers. I also pay tribute to county and district councils for the cross-party political leadership

that they have shown in pursuit of devolution. Members will know that the original agreement for both Norfolk and Suffolk was not one to which the Government could agree, for a number of reasons that have been identified. However, the commitment from leaders in the area to finding a way through is appreciated and valued, and we will honour that in the next steps.

We absolutely believe that in large parts of the country—I see it in Exeter, Lincoln, Ipswich and Norwich—we have important economic anchors in cities that previously have not had a seat at the devolution table because they have been district councils. We have to deal with that as we go forward.

**Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): Will the Minister update the House on the capacity in his Department to manage these reorganisations? He spoke about the deadline having passed, and having received expressions of interest. How many can his Department manage at any one time? What will be the determining factor in which ones are chosen to progress now?

**Jim McMahon:** The Department stands ready to support local areas, both on devolution and on local government reorganisation, and will make sure that there is a genuine partnership when it comes to ensuring that capacity. We will not just rely on local areas to find it; we will work together on that.

We will have to present the information the hon. Member refers to on another date, not today. Until we know what the final programme is, we will not know what is required to deliver it. There is no arbitrary upper limit. Nevertheless, we need to be realistic that there is a high bar on devolution and reorganisation, and we can only allow forward plans that have a credible proposal for devolution. If plans are less developed when it comes to devolution, then even if other parts of them are compelling, and do things that we would want to see come about, politically, I am afraid that cannot stand. They have to be credible plans that ultimately lead to fulfilling the ambition for devolution, and that will be the priority.

**Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): The historical bankruptcy in Thurrock, from which my constituents are still suffering, is symptomatic of a system of local government that is letting people down badly. Devolution and reorganisation represent a once-in-a-generation opportunity to capitalise on growing opportunities in Essex, deliver better value and improve services. Does the Minister agree that reorganisation is the right step, and this is the right time? It will allow us to move on from the broken system and deliver more power and opportunities to communities in places such as Thurrock.

**Jim McMahon:** My hon. Friend will know that there are particular issues in Thurrock, relating to historical decisions taken in that local authority. We believe that efficiencies can be garnered through reorganisation, and that if we redirect money to neighbourhood services that people can see and feel, their satisfaction with local government and local public services will increase. We also accept, though, that some systemic problems are not addressed by reorganisation alone; in the end, the multi-year settlement and the funding reforms that are taking place will have to be the foundation for that.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (North Cotswolds) (Con): The people of Gloucestershire are expecting elections this May to their county council. If that is not to happen, will the Minister tell us precisely when the date will be decided, for all the reasons so excellently set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds)?

**Jim McMahon:** The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. Clarity is important for areas; they need to know whether they will go ahead with elections so that they can organise. We seek to give clarity by the end of the month, so in a couple of weeks at most.

**Andy MacNae** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I associate myself with the excellent remarks of my Lancashire colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Mr Foster), and I thank the Minister for recognising the massive opportunity that reorganisation and devolution presents for Lancashire. It has been held back for many years by our inability to come together and move forward. Given that we now have an ongoing devolution process, and genuine proposals for reorganisation that are supported by a majority of councils across the county and by MPs, and given the significant costs of holding local elections—£3 million in the case of Lancashire, which could fill an awful lot of potholes—it feels like Lancashire county council's refusal to put forward a proposal to cancel the upcoming May elections is about self-interest and short-term political imperatives being put ahead of the needs of residents. Does the Minister agree that it is regrettable, to say the least, that the request has not come forward, and that we should not hold those elections, but put the needs of residents first?

**Jim McMahon:** I will be careful. When we came into government six months ago, I was clear that we needed to reset the relationship between central and local government. For many years in opposition, I observed Governments parading around instances of councils that were in disagreement in a very public way, and I thought that undermined the system as a whole. While it might not always be possible, where there are differences of views, they should probably be aired in private and not in Parliament, from a ministerial point of view.

Even though there are differences in Lancashire about pace, potentially, and about what a good outcome might be, there is at least agreement that devolution is the right thing for the county, and that having the same powers as Greater Manchester and the Liverpool city region could be game changing for Lancashire's economy and local jobs. When I say "local jobs", I mean skilled, decent work that gives people pride of place; that is absolutely central to this Government. Let us focus on agreement, and put some of the disagreements to one side. However, I take on board my hon. Friend's local perspective entirely.

**Dame Karen Bradley** (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I am pleased to see that Staffordshire is not on the list and that we will have our county elections this May. The Minister will know, however, that my constituents do not want to be subsumed into greater Stoke-on-Trent. Will he give them some reassurance—any at all—that they will have the choice and can say no if they do not want to be part of greater Stoke-on-Trent?

**Jim McMahon:** I quite like Stoke-on-Trent; I am not sure what the local disputes are there. Maybe that is something not to go into. Focusing instead on process, that change would require consultation, and every area that has had a devolution agreement and eventually a mayoral election has had that consultation take place. There was some recent polling that said that the public were more likely to be supportive of the mayoral model of government if they had a mayor already in place, because they could see the benefit. In the end, how we reconcile the situation England will require compromise in some places. I say that because England is unique, it is diverse and, from an identity point of view, there is much that different areas have in common but there are some contradictions too. It is our job, through the course of building this out, to work at a local level to try and find the right solutions. That commitment is firm.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. The House will see that we have a lot of Members to try and get in, and I need to finish this urgent question by 2.15 pm. Will the Minister and other Members keep that in mind when answering and asking questions?

**Louise Jones** (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): The reason I am in this place and my absolute priority is to ensure that we deliver good public services to the people of North East Derbyshire, through well-run government with representatives who are invested in their local community and held to account. Will the Minister assure me that any discussions over reorganisation will include local boroughs and districts, and that any agreement reached will make sure that we reflect both those priorities?

**Jim McMahon:** The request can come in for reorganisation, but the Government's role from the point at which we start the statutory invitation process becomes quasi-judicial. We therefore need to make sure we steer well clear of defining what outcome we want because we are, in effect, neutral in that process. It is our job to receive proposals as they come forward, and it could well be that the county and district councils put forward entirely different proposals. It is our job to make sure we consider both on an equal basis.

**Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): As the Minister knows, the former administration at Woking borough council racked up debts of £2.1 billion. That money will never be fully repaid to the Government, but surrounding local authorities are anxious that as part of reorganisation they might have to share that debt. Will the Minister confirm how the Government will handle debt in Woking, Surrey and elsewhere as part of the reorganisation? Also, will he agree to write off Woking's unsustainable debts to ensure that reorganisation happens sensibly?

**Jim McMahon:** Agreeing to write off £2 billion of debt at the Dispatch Box would be quite career-limiting, I would say. I can say, however, that the scale of the financial challenge in some areas is absolutely understood and we will work to try and find a solution. We are not yet at the point of announcing that, however.

**Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): In Hartlepool, 75% of every penny spent by the council is spent on social care. That is contributing to a burden on council taxpayers in Hartlepool that is far too high. Does the



[Mr Jonathan Brash]

Minister agree that in the wider local government reorganisation, consideration needs to be given to regional collaboration on social care or, indeed, removing social care from local government altogether to ease the burden on council tax payers?

**Jim McMahon:** My hon. Friend will be aware that Dame Louise Casey is conducting a broader review of adult social care for reasons that are well understood by the House. On whether the matter should or should not sit with local government, I will say that where local government really excels is in being local and rooted in the community, in being the deliverer of a public service and in being able to organise at a place level. That does make a difference, and we should not underestimate the impact when done well. We need to make sure that social services are adequately funded for the work they have to do to provide a good level of service for local people.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Across Basildon and Billericay, my residents are concerned about the idea of two years of delay while massive reorganisation goes on locally. Will the Minister provide reassurance that the local plan for 27,000 new houses across the area, which has just been consulted on, will not suddenly be rushed through by a local council that will not exist in future, with residents having to live with the consequences for years to come?

**Jim McMahon:** I would say that, given our housing crisis, 27,000 new homes seems like good news to me, and we need to see more of that. Councils need to operate in a business as usual way, making sure that they get their business done. The worst outcome would be for councils going through a reorganisation to press pause on important items of business. That would be a complete absence of leadership.

**Alex Mayer** (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): One effect of creating more strategic authorities appears to be the splitting of transport and highways powers in more areas. Will the Minister provide assurances that this will not slow down the delivery of capital projects that are necessary to achieve economic growth?

**Jim McMahon:** No, that is certainly right. Our ambition is for acceleration, not for lagging behind, and we will make sure that no schemes are delayed as a result of reorganisation.

**Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Minister has quite rightly pointed out that residents across the country expect councillors to take a more strategic approach to deliver better services. My residents across Bromsgrove and its villages share that ambition. However, the biggest elephant in the room is the role of adult social care in the local government sector. Can the Minister outline to the House what decisions and what conversations are taking place across Government to address this so that future new councils, post reform, get off on the very best foot to improve their areas?

**Jim McMahon:** I feel that we have gone a long way to doing that, although we do accept that this is a bridging position to get us to the multi-year settlement. None the

less, £3.7 billion of new money for adult social care in the settlement is a commitment laid out in pounds and pence in the way that local government has been asking for. We accept that there is a long way to go, and that councils need more support, but the Government are absolutely committed to rebuilding the foundations of local government and putting it on an even keel.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement. Many of us across the House will have campaigned in district elections, as I have in Harlow. The No.1 thing that comes up on the doorstep in district elections is potholes, even though they are not the responsibility of district councils. Does the Minister agree that this English devolution Bill will not just simplify local government but be more cost-effective and bring more value back to the taxpayer?

**Jim McMahon:** My hon. Friend makes a very good case for reorganisation, and I agree with him.

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): As the Minister will know, in Lincolnshire, where there are two unitaries as well as the county council, the three top-tier authorities have agreed on a package to go unitary. There are complications, because there is a ward boundary review going on in north-east Lincolnshire at the moment. Would the Minister consider cancelling that, as it seems a complete waste of resources? In the county council area, which covers roughly two thirds of the county, a mayoral election is taking place, and a new combined authority is being established this May. Given that, does he agree that it is important that elections go ahead to give the county a new mandate for what lies ahead?

**Jim McMahon:** From our perspective, we cannot allow the cancellation—or postponement, I would say—of elections to be driven by any political views. We are clear that this is an administrative process and it is about whether areas satisfy criteria that meet our devolution priority programme. Where areas are already in the programme because they have mayoral elections this year, it would be reasonable of me to say that we would need to see where the benefit is of elections being cancelled, given that devolution is taking place. But as I have said, we have only just received the proposals. We are taking time to review them, and we will make sure that is done in a fair way.

**Sean Woodcock** (Banbury) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a serving district councillor for 13 years.

I broadly welcome the thrust of this document. My question is on a matter that the Minister has already referred to—areas that are serviced by a number of different local authorities, which mine is. I have a county council, two district councils, any number of parish councils, and Banbury town council—Labour-run for the first time ever. In those areas, there will be a wide variety of views as to what a local government reorganisation should look like, because different communities have different views. Can the Minister assure me that the fast-tracking and the speed of this process, which I acknowledge the reason for, will not lead to rushed proposals that do not take into account what communities actually feel and look like?



**Jim McMahon:** I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend of that. Let me just say that in 2019, 11 district council elections were cancelled to allow reorganisations to take place, and so were seven in 2020. In 2021, the elections of three county councils and three district councils were cancelled to allow reorganisation. I say that because we cannot allow people to think that this is, in any sense, something new that has come out of nowhere. This is the day-to-day business of reorganisation done in the right place, in the right way, with full public consultation.

**Rupert Lowe** (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): Given the abject failure of devolution in both Scotland and Wales and the fact that the Americans fought a war of independence on the slogan “No taxation without representation”, my constituents of Great Yarmouth would like an answer to two questions. First, why should they continue to pay their council tax beyond May, when they will not be represented by elected people? And secondly, by what name do they call these unelected councillors after May?

**Jim McMahon:** We need to be clear that the members who will discharge the functions of the council and the executive have been elected. The idea that they are not elected is not accurate, and we need to be careful about the language that we use. I believe—I am sure the hon. Member believes—that most councillors are good public servants and go into local government for the right reasons to represent their community, and we should not be targeting them unnecessarily. To be clear, they were elected, and we might take the view that, if they meet the criteria, their period of office should be extended to allow election to a new shadow unitary authority. On that basis, I hope that local people will support it.

**Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the level of engagement that he has given both me and my colleagues on this process since the English devolution White Paper was published. He will know that I have a high level of enthusiasm for local communities being given the ability to take more control of services in their area. Does he agree that devolution and reorganisation offers cities such as Exeter, Lincoln and elsewhere—the key economic drivers of this country—the opportunity to grow and invest sustainably in partnership with strategic authorities? Can he shed a bit more light on the process when a county council and a district council potentially disagree on the way forward?

**Jim McMahon:** It is quite usual for a county council and a district council to disagree on the way forward. From a Government point of view, we will consider proposals on an equal basis wherever they have come from—from a county council, a district council or a unitary authority that might change its boundaries. It is important that that is clear, because we want to make sure that, in the end, it is the right deal for local people, it is the right deal for taxpayers and it delivers good public services.

**Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

How will the Minister avoid a fire sale of district and borough council assets once they are merged with county councils, which are crippled by the soaring cost of adult social care? Does he therefore agree with me that 2028 is too late?

**Jim McMahon:** We can only go as fast as the process allows. We can start the process early, and we have done that. We can give clarity early, and we are doing that. What we cannot do is to shortcut a legal process that requires adequate consultation, the development of proposals and a transfer of workforce and assets to a new unitary council. That must be done in the right way, which takes time. We absolutely understand the point about local community assets, which is why community asset protection and the community right to buy are so central to our agenda going forward.

**Adam Jodge** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Minister will recall, I hope, the concerns that I outlined the last time he was before the House. Efficiencies, as he put it, and improved services are of course important, but so too are local identities and existing communities. With that in mind—I have asked him this before—how will we ensure that local identities are protected? Will he meet me to discuss the impact that these proposals might have on the ancient and loyal borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme?

**Jim McMahon:** The point that my hon. Friend makes about balancing identity is as much about culture and approach as it is about where boundaries for councils are drawn. Sometimes, the identity of a council will match closely with the identity of a place, but often it does not. In urban, rural or coastal areas, many communities are far more nuanced or localised, and there can be some quite tense local neighbourhood disputes as a result. Any reorganisation has to respect the historic locally felt identity of every part of the new area, not just the area in which its headquarters might be based or that its council might be named after, and holding firm on that has to be part of the approach.

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Government’s timetable is wholly inadequate. Given that the previous deal that Norfolk negotiated was scrapped without any consultation, how will the public be consulted on any changes going forward, and does the Minister accept that a minimum population of half a million may not be appropriate in rural areas, to avoid councils being very remote from the people they serve?

**Jim McMahon:** We tackled that head on in the White Paper, which said that, for efficiency, the minimum population will be 500,000, but was clear in the same paragraph that—this is where devolution goes hand in hand with reorganisation—there needs to be some flexibility for the reasons that the hon. Member set out. That is our firm commitment.

**Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Kent county council has opted to go on the priority programme and cancel elections this May; I guess turkeys do not vote for Christmas. The timetable going forward is a little confused. We will have mayorals in 2027, unitaries in 2028, and then it stands up later on. Could the Minister give some more detail on that? If the process is stretched

[Mike Martin]

out like that, Conservative Kent county councillors will be in power for seven years. Judging by my inbox, the people of Kent are absolutely appalled by that. I would be grateful for more details.

**Jim McMahon:** From the Government's point of view, acting in a legal, quasi-judicial way, we have to take such decisions on the value of the evidence and the proposals. It is not our job to get involved in the politics of whether the Liberal Democrats want to see the back of the Tories but the Tories want to avoid an election, or vice versa. It is our job to play with a straight bat, and look at the benefits of the proposals. Kent has applied, but we are going through the process of screening applications to ensure that they are realistic proposals for devolution and LGR that hold together. If they meet those criteria, we will support them. If they do not, we will not.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Despite what senior county councillors are telling Ministers, there is absolutely no clamour in Essex for devolution—quite the reverse. Nor do the public support the Government's proposal to cancel the local elections; that is anti-democratic. If the Government do press ahead, why do we not take the opportunity to have a county-wide referendum in Essex to see whether the public—the council tax payers—really support this? They can vote for massive change or to remain as they are. If there is such a referendum—I never thought these words would pass my lips—I will gladly vote remain.

**Jim McMahon:** I think the right hon. Member is getting at the fact that there will be a range of views on this issue, but it is the Government's job to give direction, and we believe that efficiencies can be drawn out. When asked, I think local people would say that they would much rather that local neighbourhood services are maintained and grown, rather than bear the overhead costs of organisations that exist for the sake of it. It is for the consultation, and the proposals, to draw out the best outcome in the process.

**Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): I welcome the theory of simplifying local government, but I am concerned about the pace at which the Government are trying to move. Devon has a very complicated landscape, with Labour-run cities, a Conservative-run county and many Liberal Democrat districts. Conflicting proposals have already been submitted to the Government by the districts and the county, so can the Minister explain how the Government will adjudicate between those conflicting proposals and decide which one will come out on top?

**Jim McMahon:** We will see what comes forward from local areas. In some areas, there may well be a general consensus on the number of unitary authorities, but varying views on the boundary lines. In other areas, we can perhaps expect there to be entire disagreement on both the number of councils that should follow from the proposals and the boundaries that would be drawn as a result. At this stage, all we can say is let us see what comes forward. We will try to make the right decision by balancing identity, efficiency and the relationship to devolution going forward.

**Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): We already knew that the Government wanted to abolish our local district and borough councils in Leicestershire without consulting local people. We now know that the proposal will involve a significant expansion of the boundaries of the city of Leicester—something demanded by the Mayor of Leicester that would lead to significantly higher council tax for my residents. Within days, thousands of local people have signed a petition started by me and other local MPs who are against the proposal, including my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), who cannot be here today. My local districts and boroughs are against it, so will the Government at least agree to hold a local referendum in Leicestershire before imposing this proposal from London that local people do not want?

**Jim McMahon:** A theme is developing of campaigning for elections to bodies that some wish will not exist in the future—that sounds familiar—and for referendums being the answer to some of this. It is about local leaders showing leadership. I understand completely that there are different views, but I am impressed by the leadership being shown by Labour, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and others, because local leaders believe in their place and want the best outcome for it. I will leave the local politics to them. It is our job to ensure that we assess the proposals that come forward on a fair basis.

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): My constituents are well served by the fiscal stewardship of their district council of Elmbridge, and are rightly concerned that they will be forced to take on the debt of neighbouring councils such as Woking. Equally, they are looking forward to the May elections, and kicking Conservative Surrey out. Does the Minister not agree that leaders taking devolution forward should have a democratic mandate, and will he reassure my constituents that any unitary moves will be paused until the question of debt is sorted out?

**Jim McMahon:** We certainly accept, particularly in the case of Woking, where the debt is significant, standing at over £2 billion, that the question of debt has to be addressed through the process, but it is for the process to address it. We cannot say up front how we will treat debt in different areas, because every area is different. I do not think that any Member would expect us to do that.

**Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Residents of the Isle of Wight are expecting full elections this May. The no-overall-control unitary authority has asked the Government to be part of a priority devolution deal with Hampshire, but not local authority reorganisation, which is not on the table. We are not being asked to do that because we are already a unitary. Does the Minister agree, therefore, that there is no good reason to delay elections when the Isle of Wight council's future and viability is not under discussion? That is an accepted point. Why should a democracy have to have elections when the council will continue?

**Jim McMahon:** I think that is a fair point, and I will take it away.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire are working together collaboratively on the Heart of Wessex devolution deal and hope to be on the devolution priority programme, but there is still some uncertainty over what decision Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole will make. Can the Minister confirm that the decision to include the Wessex proposal will not be held back, depending on the BCP decision?

**Jim McMahon:** We have to stick to the principles of the White Paper, because that informs the legislation that will come later this year. We are very clear in the criteria that we will not, and cannot, agree to any devolution proposals that create orphans that cannot be resolved. We expect that local leaders will come together and do what is right, given the geography of their place, to deliver devolution as soon as possible.

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): Cheltenham has had a voice since Victoria was on the throne, and we need to be reassured by the Minister that we will retain that voice as part of any devolution and local government reorganisation. Otherwise, power will simply be taken away from my community and given either to Gloucester or as far away as Bristol, with a new regional mayor. Can the Minister reassure me that localism will be part of his agenda too?

**Jim McMahon:** The hon. Member makes a fair point. We are clear in the White Paper that we want to see devolution rolled out at an ambitious pace. We are doing that, and are pleased with the responses that we have had. We want to see local government reorganisation because we believe that efficiencies can be drawn out and reinvested back into frontline services that people see, feel and value. We also accept that that cannot be at the cost of local people feeling connected and empowered in the places where they live. Local empowerment and powers for the local community are central to the White Paper, and to our agenda going forward.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): My constituents in Harrogate and Knaresborough recently underwent local government reorganisation. As part of that, the North Yorkshire (Structural Changes) Order 2022 granted five years to develop a new North Yorkshire council-wide local plan. Work on local district plans halted to prioritise that new plan, which has now been compromised by the introduction of new housing targets under the national planning policy framework.

Will councils undergoing new rounds of local government reorganisation receive transitional arrangements, or will they fall into the same trap as Harrogate and Knaresborough and North Yorkshire, where speculative planning applications will see endless concreting over the green belt and issues with getting housing where we actually need it, rather than where we want it? Will the Minister meet me to discuss the legacy issues of that local government reorganisation, and outline what lessons have been learned from previous reorganisations?

**Jim McMahon:** The hon. Member is conflating two separate issues. One is the process of reorganisation, and his area of Harrogate has been through that process,

including the postponement of elections to facilitate it. On housing development, if he wants to stop speculative development and to have control of what is built in local communities in Harrogate, the best way to achieve that is to have a plan in place where developers can be held to account.

**Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Talking of localism, district councils provided a useful amount of local accountability. How will the Minister ensure that local accountability continues when the regional identity may be different? May I also ask about the future of towns and parishes, which are not mentioned at all, and neither are national park authorities? How will those be empowered to have more local responsibility?

**Jim McMahon:** The White Paper was directive on this issue. I can only assume the hon. Gentleman has not read it, or he got bored and gave up halfway through—I will leave him to answer that. Over quite a long period of time, councillors have been relegated to the back benches if they are not in the cabinet, and we do not believe that is right going forward. We want local councillors to be frontline councillors, community conveyors, leading in their local communities and getting things done. However we marshal the system—regardless of the size of the council, where it is, whether it is a unitary council in a met area or a reorganised council in a shire county—localism has to be at its heart.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to this urgent question. He is outlining a clear policy and strategy for the way forward, and we welcome that. The papers today are full of calls for debt cancellations for English councils, which do not provide much relief to those councils that have sought to stretch moneys and resources to make ends meet, rather than ramping up debt with vanity projects. How can the Minister ensure that reorganisation assists councils to prioritise people over policy?

**Jim McMahon:** I thought I was going to get a request to reorganise Newtownards—I have got enough on my plate with England! The point the hon. Gentleman makes about the treatment of debt is important, and we understand there are pressures. In most places, the treatment of accrued debt is manageable within the geography, but we accept there are outliers—Woking and Thurrock have been mentioned—where the debt that has been built up is significant and that we need to take a view on that. We are not at that stage yet until we see what proposal will be developed further.

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. There is a strong case for devolution in Norfolk. However, can the Minister confirm that holding elections in May does not prevent devolution for Norfolk, and would he agree that Norfolk's voters should be allowed to have their say on who is taking forward our devolution negotiations?

**Jim McMahon:** We need to separate out that the devolution priority programme is one stream and the local government reorganisation programme is another.



[Jim McMahon]

We are trying to bring those streams alongside each other, recognising that they are to a degree separate processes, so that at key points in the decision-making process, they come together to ensure transparency and clarity and so people know what timetable we are working to. I accept to a point that they can be decoupled, but the two are linked. If we are going to reorganise and move towards mayoral combined authorities, we have to bring them in line to ensure that it is a programme that makes sense in the round.

**Alex Brewer** (North East Hampshire) (LD): People in North East Hampshire have told me loud and clear that they want their democratic right to vote in May. Given that councillors up for re-election were elected in May 2021, does the Minister think they still have a mandate to make decisions for their local communities?

**Jim McMahon:** If we decide to postpone the elections based on a credible plan that moves devolution and reorganisation along, the councillors who have their terms extended are legitimate and have the powers and rights of any other councillor. As I have said, we need to be careful that we do not undermine the democratic process by trying to portray councillors who believe in their communities and who by and large are doing a good job, regardless of party politics, as somehow not there by right. They have been elected; it just so happens that in some places their term will be extended by a short period.

**Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): Residents in Surrey Heath face the prospect of cancelled elections, forced unitarisation and then forced amalgamation into a new western Surrey unitary authority, if the leader of Surrey county council gets his way. That western unitary authority would inherit £5 billion of debt. I am sure the Minister will agree that in seeking a new sense of identity for west Surrey, a shared sense of bankruptcy was not what we were looking for, but that is the prospect we face. What would the Minister say to my residents, who played no part in accumulating that debt but who may in the future play a part in paying it off?

**Jim McMahon:** We have covered the hon. Member's point about debt. Perhaps he has scars from coalitions of the past, but I suggest that now is a time to come together and put party interests to one side.

## Health and Social Care: Winter Update

2.15 pm

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):** With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on winter pressures.

I start by saying that my thoughts, and I am sure the thoughts of the whole House, are with the nurse who was stabbed in a horrific attack at Royal Oldham hospital on Saturday. Nurses are the backbone of our NHS. They should be able to care for their patients without fear of abuse or violence. As she goes through treatment for her injuries, we pray for her speedy and full recovery and that she will be left to recover in peace.

I want to thank our NHS and social care staff for their remarkable effort, stamina and care in the most challenging of circumstances. Over the past few weeks, I have seen at first hand that staff are doing their level best in hospitals and care homes across our country—in the south-west, Essex, London, South Yorkshire and the north-west. Even when patients are left waiting far longer than they should be, and in conditions they should never be made to endure, they are still at pains to stress that the staff are doing their best.

I said on day one in this job that I would never gloss over problems in the health service and I would not pretend that everything is going well when it is not. The experience of patients this winter is unacceptable. I visited one A&E department over Christmas where I was told on the way in that I was lucky as I had come on a quiet day. Yet, as I walked through the hospital, I saw patients on trolleys lining the corridors where they were being treated, without the dignity or safety they should expect as a minimum. I saw frail elderly people on beds in the emergency department, many with dementia, crying out in pain and confusion because, ultimately, they were in the wrong place for their care needs. That was supposedly a good day.

The King's Fund has said:

"The NHS is facing a toxic cocktail of pressures this winter", and it is right. Fourteen years of under-investment and a lack of effective reform have combined with a tidal wave of rising pressures. This has been the busiest year on record for our ambulance and accident and emergency services. We have had severe cold snaps, with temperatures as low as minus 15° in some parts of England. There are 5,100 patients in hospital beds with flu—more than three times the number at this point last year. Alongside the impact on patients, the rise in respiratory infections saw 53,000 NHS staff forced off work sick in the first week of the year. The result has been patients let down by ambulances that do not arrive on time, A&E departments that leave them waiting 12 hours or more, and the continued normalisation of corridor care. This is not the level of care staff want for their patients, and it is not the level of care this Government will ever accept for patients.

I said coming into this winter that 14 years of failure cannot be turned around in six months. It will take time to fix our broken NHS. Since July, we have done everything we can to prepare the NHS for winter. Following four months of silence from the previous Government, I called the British Medical Association on day one, met it in week one, and within three weeks negotiated a deal to end the junior doctors' strike with a new deal for

resident doctors. For the first winter in three years, staff are on the frontline, not the picket line. The Chancellor made immediate in-year investment in the NHS to fill the black hole we inherited and prevent us from having to cut back on services.

We have introduced the respiratory syncytial virus vaccine, and more than a million people and counting are protected against that virus. In total, 29 million vaccines have been delivered for flu, covid-19 and RSV, and more patients are protected against flu than at this stage last winter. If anyone is yet to get themselves vaccinated, it is not too late to protect themselves, their family and the NHS. They can check if they are eligible and book through their local GP or pharmacy.

We are working hand in hand with NHS England and care leaders, and I continue to meet regularly with senior leaders in social care, NHS England and the UK Health Security Agency. We have an excellent national operations centre running seven days a week. Its data allows us to zoom in—not just on individual hospitals but on individual patient waiting times—to respond in real time to spikes in pressures, and to manage threats as they emerge. The NHS is now using critical incidents proactively to focus minds and get the system responding to de-escalate and steer back to safer waters. I am happy to report that there is currently one live critical incident, down from 24 last week.

However, I do not pretend that that is good enough. It will take time to get back to the standards that patients deserve, but it can be done. That will require a big shift in the focus of healthcare—out of the hospital and into the community—to free up beds for emergency patients and to prevent people from having to call an ambulance or go to A&E in the first place. That is the reform agenda that the Government are enacting.

In recent weeks, we have announced steps to begin rebuilding general practice, and immediate and long-term action in social care. When we came into office, we inherited a situation in which qualified GPs could not get a job, while patients could not get a GP. That is why, within weeks, I found just shy of £100 million to recruit 1,000 more GPs by April. We have recruited hundreds of GPs to the frontline already, and we will recruit hundreds more in the months to come. We have announced an extra £889 million in funding for general practice, which is the biggest funding uplift in years, alongside a package of reforms to bust bureaucracy, slash unnecessary targets and give GPs more time to spend with their patients—our first step towards bringing back the family doctor.

Ten days ago, I visited a care home in Carlisle that was offering intermediate step-down care for NHS hospitals. It was able to give patients en suite bathroom facilities in care homes, with rehab, all at half the price it was costing the taxpayer to keep patients in a hospital bed up the road. That is better for patients and less expensive for taxpayers. Yet there are 12,000 patients in hospital beds today who do not need to be there but cannot be discharged because appropriate care is not available. That is why the Government are making up to £3.7 billion of extra funding available for local authorities that provide social care. It is why we are delivering an extra 7,800 home adaptations through the disabled facilities grant this year and next year. It is why we have delivered the biggest increase in carer's allowance since the 1970s,

worth an extra £2,300 to family carers. It is why we are introducing fair-pay agreements to tackle the 131,000 vacancies in social care. And it is why we have appointed Baroness Louise Casey to help build a national consensus on the long-term solutions for social care.

From visiting emergency departments, monitoring the performance of the NHS over this winter and noting the variation in performance across the country, I know that we can clearly get our ambulance and A&E services working better. Before the spring, we will set out the lessons learned from this winter and the improvements that we will put in place ahead of next winter.

Finally, let me be clear on corridor care, which became normalised in NHS hospitals under the previous Government: I will never accept or tolerate patients being treated in corridors. It is unsafe, undignified and a cruel consequence of 14 years of failure on the NHS, and I am determined to consign it to the history books. I cannot and will not promise that patients will not be treated in corridors next year. It will take time to undo the damage that has been done to our NHS, but that is this Government's ambition.

Annual winter pressures should not automatically lead to an annual winter crisis—indeed, there were no annual winter crises by the end of the previous Labour Government. That is why this Government are investing an extra £26 billion in our health and care services, and undertaking the fundamental reform that both services need. That will take time, but we will deliver an NHS and a national care service that provide people with care where and when they need it. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.25 pm

**Edward Argar** (Melton and Syston) (Con): As ever, I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his typical courtesy in giving me advance sight of his statement. May I join him in saying that our thoughts are with the nurse in Oldham who was so viciously attacked? Like him, we wish her a full and speedy recovery. May I also echo his words of gratitude to NHS and social care staff for all they do to help and support patients and our constituents?

We last heard from Ministers on winter pressures just before Christmas. Yet, as the Secretary of State has set out, the situation has continued to grow more severe. We have all heard about those pressures in the media and from patients, constituents and staff. Indeed, I will take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who I know has been on the frontline and has, I suspect, seen those pressures—the unacceptably long waits in A&Es for ambulances, and corridor care and its impact on patients—at first hand. When someone calls an ambulance, they need to know that it will come, but it cannot if it is sitting in a hospital car park. At my local hospital in Leicester, for example, over 36% of ambulances handing over had a one hour-plus wait, and I am sure that that is replicated around the country.

The Secretary of State highlights that the number of patients in hospital with flu is triple what it was a year ago, yet it appears that the rate of flu vaccine uptake for over-65s, at-risk groups and healthcare workers is lower

[Edward Argar]

than last year. He wants more people to be vaccinated, and I share that view, but will he set out in more detail what he is doing to further drive vaccine rates and ensure that vaccines are available for all those who need and want them?

As the Secretary of State said, more than two dozen hospitals declared critical incidents last week. Although I welcome the fact that the vast bulk of those incidents have been stood down, will he set out what support and additional resource is being offered not only to hospitals that have reached the point of declaring critical incidents, but to others that continue to face pressures?

Last year, the Government provided additional funding for hospitals and social care to boost capacity and, vitally, the number of beds in hospitals, as well as to tackle delayed discharges. Will the Secretary of State set out in more detail what he is doing in a similar vein? Will he update the House on how many people currently in acute settings are fit for discharge but have not been discharged for a variety of reasons?

The Secretary of State mentioned pay, and said that he had negotiated a deal. I say gently to him that what he did was not negotiation but capitulation to an inflation-busting pay rise.

None of these pressures comes as a surprise to me or to the Secretary of State. He was open and candid, as he often is, in acknowledging that there would be a winter crisis this year. NHS England directors were warning that they did not have the resources needed to surge capacity or increase social care packages now, which the Conservative Government provided in previous years. The royal colleges said that nothing had been done to mitigate a winter crisis, and NHS organisations said that they needed more support to prevent ambulance delays, overcrowded A&Es and people being stuck in hospital beds because of a lack of community and social care. He knows—we have spoken about it before—the importance of flow from ambulance to A&E, and from A&E to a bed or to discharge. What extra steps is he taking to increase the number of care packages now rather than in the future, and will he consider allowing community hospitals, such as mine in Melton Mowbray, to play a greater role in providing care to local communities in order to ease pressure on acute settings?

Those concerns were all raised in September and October. My predecessor as shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), asked about them, yet the Secretary of State failed to provide an update to the House until Ministers came to the House just before Christmas. Indeed, I recently asked a named day question about when the Secretary of State started chairing his weekly winter preparedness meetings. Despite, one hopes, a quick look at his diary giving the answer, I received a holding answer. I only got the correct answer after that holding answer had been sent to me, stating that it was in December. Can he say on which date in December the first of those meetings was held?

Before Christmas, I and the Conservatives called for a winter-specific bed increase plan. We still have not had one. Will the Secretary of State set out what he is doing to increase the number of beds and the amount of capacity now?

While the Secretary of State talks the talk, he has not done the work ahead of this winter. Will he now reassure patients and staff that he will urgently boost capacity, resources and support to ensure our constituents get the care they need when they need it?

**Wes Streeting:** Where to begin, Madam Deputy Speaker? The shadow Health Secretary does a really good line in diagnosing the problem as if these are somehow new facts to him, or to the country. In fact, one does not have to be a Minister of long service in this House, or indeed a Member of long service, to remember that only a short matter of months ago, the shadow Secretary of State was a Minister in the Department. Time and again, he asks questions about the state of the crisis and the challenge in the NHS without showing a shred of responsibility for that crisis, which he played a part in creating.

It is not just the shadow Secretary of State but every one of his predecessors who had a hand in creating the situation that Lord Darzi spelled out: underinvestment and botched reform. It is the situation we see today, with pretty much every part of our health and care services—be it primary care, community care, mental health services, secondary care or social care—under extraordinary and historic pressures. It is all very well criticising from the Opposition Benches, but the shadow Secretary of State demonstrates the same pattern of behaviour as his predecessor: acting like the arsonist criticising the fire brigade for not doing enough, quickly enough, to put out the fire they started. It is truly shameful.

I turn to the questions raised by the shadow Secretary of State. On delayed discharges, in December—the latest data we have—12,000 on average per day were medically fit for discharge but unable to be discharged. Bed numbers are broadly the same as they were this time last year: 102,546, versus 102,226 under the previous Government. That actually says something about what we have experienced in our weekly updates: the work that is taking place between health and social care services to improve the flow of patients is having some effect when we take into account our ability to flex bed numbers up and down against the backdrop of higher occupancy from flu, the added challenge of norovirus, and the other seasonal conditions that we see at this time of year.

The shadow Secretary of State asked about vaccination uptake. As I said in my statement, there have been more flu vaccinations this year than there were last year, but he raised the important issue of vaccination rates among NHS staff. Those rates are lower than we would like or expect, and we have to do some work with staff to understand why that is the case and how we can encourage further uptake. As I said, if staff are suffering with flu having not been vaccinated, not only is that a really unpleasant experience for them, it is an unpleasant experience for their colleagues if staff are off sick, and indeed for patients who are waiting longer.

On critical incidents, the shadow Secretary of State asked about the support that is being provided to NHS organisations. NHS England regional teams are working closely with integrated care boards to ensure appropriate responses are in place to address and mitigate the issues identified within each declared critical incident, all of which will have variations. We have also seen NHS



England—rightly, in my view—using the critical incident tool proactively to ensure we can provide wider system support to emergency departments that are under particular pressure.

The shadow Secretary of State asked about additional funding for winter. When I was shadow Health and Social Care Secretary, I was very clear about my cynicism regarding the pattern of behaviour we saw from our predecessors. Year after year, they would arrive in the middle of winter—often after the winter peak—with a gimmicky package of last-minute funding that delivered too little, too late without making any real difference on the frontline, all to give the impression that they were doing something to mitigate the crisis in the NHS, in which they played a serious part. I said that we would not do that, and we are not doing it. As soon as we came into office, looked at the books and saw the black hole, the Chancellor released additional funding for the NHS in-year to ensure that it had the resources it needed not to cut back. Thanks to the decisions taken by the Chancellor, the NHS has received more than £2 billion more in-year than it would have received if the Conservatives had remained in power, so we do not need any lectures on funding. Indeed, they continue to oppose the £26 billion we provided for the NHS.

Finally, the shadow Secretary of State accuses us of capitulation to frontline doctors who were out on strike because of the way they were treated by our Conservative predecessors. I just say to resident doctors who are following these proceedings, and to patients who can see the state of the NHS today and wish it were better, that we are now left in no doubt. Had the country kept the Conservatives in power, doctors would have been on the picket lines instead of the frontlines this winter; taxpayers would have continued to pay a heavy price for failure; and patients would continue to pay the price through delayed, rearranged or cancelled operations, appointments and procedures. It is proof positive that even after it was booted out of office, the Conservative party has not listened, has not learned, and is not fit to govern.

**Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): For years, like many in this House, I have seen a regular stream of local people in my surgeries and inbox who have been waiting far too long for NHS treatment. What shocks me the most, though, is when I see the same local people turn up in A&E when I am doing my shifts, having deteriorated and in even worse pain than before. Locally, there are 66,000 cases of people who have had to wait over 18 weeks for treatment, so does my colleague the Secretary of State agree that we need an urgent and emergency care plan to deliver much-needed year-on-year improvements?

**Wes Streeting:** I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, and thank her for the work she has been doing this winter on the NHS frontline, providing support to her colleagues at her local hospital—literally rolling her sleeves up and looking after people. She is absolutely right that we need an urgent and emergency care plan to make sure we see continued year-on-year improvements. I can reassure my hon. Friend that that plan is already being written; we are learning the lessons from this winter in order to apply them next winter. As I should have said to the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar),

I took the same approach when I was shadow Secretary of State: the very first meetings I held on winter planning were ahead of the general election in access talks with the Department. The first briefing I received on winter preparation was on my first day in office. Throughout the past six months heading into winter, I continued to talk to staff in the Department, NHS England and social care leaders to ensure that we were as well prepared for this winter as we could be. Right now, we are learning the lessons to prepare for next winter.

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

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): I associate myself with the comments of the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State regarding the abhorrent attack in Oldham.

The pressure on our hospitals this winter brutally demonstrates the scale of action needed after years of Conservative neglect of the NHS. Across England last month, 71% of A&E patients were seen within four hours, but that statistic varies wildly depending on where one happens to live. At Shrewsbury and Telford emergency departments last month, ambulances had to wait an average of over two hours to hand over their patients. Just 50% of patients were seen within four hours, and nearly 1,500 patients were left stuck on a trolley for more than 12 hours.

Statistics like these often fail to have much impact now, because we have heard them so regularly—particularly since winter crises have become normalised—but it is very important that we consider who is behind them. It is patients such as my constituent Emma, who having been diagnosed with sepsis spent 48 hours in a fit-to-sit area and then 12 hours on a trolley in an X-ray corridor before finally being admitted, alongside a horrifying delay in the medication required to deal with her life-threatening condition. Yet we often have to wait weeks for data that fully explains what is happening in our hospitals, and no official data is collected about the number of critical incidents. This leaves patients potentially ill-informed, and it makes scrutiny and support in this place, in particular, difficult to provide.

Will the Secretary of State commit to introducing faster and more detailed reporting about the live state of play in our emergency departments, including the number of critical incidents and the temporary escalation spaces, and give a timeline for reporting that information? Will he publish information that shows the impact that delays are having—for example, by looking at the number of deaths in emergency departments—and will he act on the long-term Liberal Democrat request to publish localised data on ambulance delays so that support is provided in areas, such as Shropshire, where it is most needed?

**Wes Streeting:** I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for her usual constructive contribution to proceedings. She is absolutely right to raise the issue of variation in performance across different parts of the country. It is not acceptable, and one thing we will be doing as a Government is to ensure that, as well as creating a rising tide that lifts all ships, we raise the floor in performance so that we see far less unwarranted and unwanted regional variation. She talked about the Shrewsbury and Telford trust, which has had a number

[Wes Streeting]

of challenges over many years. We have seen some signs of improvement as recently as this week, and we continue to support local leaders as they strive to improve the performance of their system overall.

The hon. Member raises some good and interesting questions about the frequency with which we publish data. It is right that we ensure that data is properly validated so that accurate data is put into the public domain, even as NHS England's control room monitors live reporting into the centre. I will take into account what she said about her requests both for more live data—collected and published data—about critical incidents and for more localised data in individual trusts, including ambulance services, to monitor variations in response times within a region. Although the points she has raised are interesting, I add the caveat that we would not want to burden the system with more reporting requirements if that causes a distraction from improvement. I tend to lean towards more transparency in data and reporting, however, and I will take into account the representations she has made as we put together our urgent and emergency care plan.

**Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): At the Victoria hospital in Kirkcaldy, paramedics have had to establish a makeshift ward outside as ambulances queue up outside A&E. The number of people presenting in December 2024 was roughly the same as in December 2019, but there has been an increase of almost 300% in those waiting over four hours at A&E. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is a dreadful indictment of 18 years of SNP rule in Scotland, and that the SNP Government must use some of the additional £4.9 billion from the UK Labour Budget to get a grip? My constituents deserve so much better than this.

**Wes Streeting:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The conditions she describes at her local hospital are truly shocking. As I have said, and this is often quoted by the SNP, all roads lead to Westminster, and I am happy to report that up that road from Westminster to Holyrood lies a record uplift in funding for the Scottish Government. They have no excuses for inaction. They need to grip the crisis in the NHS in Scotland, as we are here. The difference, as my hon. Friend states, is that they have a record of 18 years that they cannot defend, and I hope people will consider that record very carefully when they decide who should govern in Scotland at the next set of Scottish elections.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): May I press the Secretary of State on that data point? It is not just the Liberal Democrats making these representations; the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, HealthWatch, the British Medical Association, Age UK and many others also want the data. This matters, because the situation causes moral injury to staff and compromises patient safety—and the problem is not just corridor care; it encroaches on to other wards. Will the Secretary of State commit to releasing that data before the NHS England board meeting on

4 February? In addition, what assessment has he made of the impact of this winter on less urgent care, and on elective waiting lists?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for her questions. I cannot give her a commitment to publish those statistics ahead of the next NHS England board, but I can give her an undertaking to go away and look carefully at the rhythm and pace at which we publish performance data, to make sure that we are being as transparent as we can, as fast as we can. That, I think, should be the principle that underpins our approach to the publication of data. She is right to talk about wider system pressures as a result of what we see in emergency departments. We will wait to review the performance of the NHS overall until we exit winter. I think we have seen some effective protection of elective activity throughout this winter, but that will of course vary from provider to provider.

The hon. Member mentioned a whole number of organisations calling for more data transparency. I, too, welcome the very public representations that we have heard from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine and others about the need to tackle corridor care. Let me assure her and all those who have made representations that we are absolutely determined to turn this situation around, and not just improve the performance of urgent and emergency care, but get a better system working. Ultimately, it is through ensuring better patient flows, and ensuring that people get the right care in the right place at the right time, that we will finally get this country out of the cycle, created by our Conservative predecessors, of winter crises.

**Several hon. Members** rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. Members will be aware that we have pressure on time today, so I will finish this statement at around 3.15 pm.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Triaging patients into virtual wards will not only protect the front door of the NHS, but be far better for patients. What is the Secretary of State doing to hold integrated care boards to account and ensure that they are putting money into primary care, as opposed to where everyone always looks, which is secondary care?

**Wes Streeting:** That is an excellent question from my hon. Friend. This Government have been walking the talk on primary care since we came into office. There was an immediate release of funding, within weeks, for 1,000 GPs, who are to be employed on the frontline by this April, and an £889 million uplift in funding for general practice that we announced prior to Christmas. I think that care in the home and care closer to home will be how we not only get the NHS back on its feet, but make sure it is fit for the future. That shift from hospital to community is one of the three big shifts that will lie at the heart of our 10-year plan for the national health service.

**Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The Secretary of State referred to social care in his update on winter pressures, and he is of course right that social care has an important role to play in taking pressure off hospitals. However, surely he can understand the frustration that the sector and those in receipt of social care feel about

his pushing the issue into a three-year review, which Sir Andrew Dilnot says is an inappropriately long time. Why will it take so long? Please can he put pressure on the review? I am sure that Baroness Casey is well capable of doing it in a shorter time.

**Wes Streeting:** I am happy to report that people will not have to wait three years for action on social care. In fact, we have seen lots of it in the last six months. We have had the biggest expansion of carer's allowance since the 1970s; the legislation for fair pay agreements in the Employment Rights Bill, brought in within the first 100 days of this Government; the uplift in funding provided by the Chancellor through her Budget; and the expansion of the disabled facilities grant. There will be more for us to do this year, including reform to make the better care fund more effective. Baroness Casey's first report will in fact be next year. It will set out the action required on social care throughout this Parliament. I hope that reassures people right across the House and, more importantly, right across the country that social care is a priority for this Government. We will seek to do better than our predecessors of all parties—I have made this point before—because we have to tackle this generational challenge facing our country.

**Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I was shocked when a young man came to my last constituency surgery to ask me as his MP to help him get a GP appointment. Morning after morning, he had spent hours queuing on the phone, and he was desperate. If my constituents cannot see a GP, they end up in A&E instead. How is the Secretary of State continuing to work to undo the Conservatives' abject failure to fix the GP crisis, which is fuelling winter pressure on hospitals?

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the challenge caused by the Conservatives' failure on general practice, which has placed pressure not just on stretched GPs, of whom there were thousands fewer when the Conservatives left office than in 2015, but on other parts of the system. That is not just worse for patients—it is certainly not a pleasant experience at the moment to be sat waiting in A&E for treatment—but more expensive for the taxpayer, because while it costs £40 for a doctor's appointment, it can cost £400 for accident and emergency attendance. That is the legacy of the Conservative Government: things are worse for patients and more expensive for taxpayers. That is the rotten legacy that we are seeking to overturn.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Last week, the UK Health Security Agency warned of elderly people suffering from heart attacks, strokes and chest infections as a result of the recent severe cold weather. Is the Secretary of State any closer to admitting that taking away the winter fuel payment from some of our most vulnerable pensioners was not just cruel, but life threatening?

**Wes Streeting:** It is irresponsible, as well as inaccurate, to suggest that the Government have taken winter fuel payments away from vulnerable pensioners. In fact, it is thanks to the decisions taken by the Chancellor that winter fuel payments were protected for the poorest pensioners. They continue to be worth £200 to eligible households, or £300 to eligible households in which there is someone aged 80 or over. We also continue to

stand behind vulnerable households by delivering the £150 warm home discount for low-income households and providing £742 million to enable the extension of the household support fund. Of course, over 12 million pensioners will see their basic or new state pension increase by 4.1%, thanks to the Government's commitment to the triple lock.

This is a running theme from Conservative Members. They seem to welcome the investment in health and social care that the Government are providing at the same time as opposing it. They cannot have it both ways. If they do not support the decisions taken by the Chancellor, they have to admit that had the Conservatives remained in power, this winter, they would have been cutting the health and social care services that pensioners really rely on.

**Several hon. Members** rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** May I ask Members to keep their questions and answers sharp, please?

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): Under the last Conservative Government, strikes cost the taxpayer millions of pounds and 1.5 million appointments were cancelled, so may I thank the Secretary of State sincerely for making it his day one priority to sort that out? He called the junior doctors and found a deal within three weeks, ending the strikes. All of us across the House thank him for sorting that out. For the first winter in three years, staff will be on the frontline, not the picket line, as the Secretary of State so rightly said. Does he agree that that is just one example of what Labour Governments do in office? We always have a laser focus on making the NHS better, unlike the Conservatives, who seem to have a laser focus on making it fail.

**Wes Streeting:** I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. The way that Conservative Members continue to behave should send a message to every resident doctor, and indeed every member of health and social care staff, in the country. Every single one of them will know that thanks to the decision the country took back in July, we have a Government who are committed to the NHS and social care. Had the Conservatives remained in power, we would be going even deeper into the already deep hole that they left the country in. We must never go back there again.

**Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): I accept that the Government are clearly not the architect of the current unacceptable state of affairs. However, may I encourage the Secretary of State to reflect again on our exchange at the Health and Social Care Committee just a month ago, when he resisted the recommendation of the president of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine that we invest in more beds to accommodate additional admissions to hospital? That would ease a return to normality, reduce the need for corridor care, and ease the pressures in emergency departments.

**Wes Streeting:** Throughout the winter, NHS providers have continued to flex bed capacity to meet demand. The important thing is that our approach to investment and reform delivers the system-wide improvements that help us to break out of the annual cycle of winter crises.



[*Wes Streeting*]

There has been criticism of the Government's focus on elective recovery—for example, people have asked if that is at the expense of urgent and emergency care—but I will not allow a status quo to settle in which the NHS is in effect reduced to a blue-light, emergency service. The Government will improve urgent and emergency care, elective recovery, primary care, community services and social care, because that is what we need to meet the health and care needs of people in this century, and that is what we will deliver.

**Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Winter pressures have caused the cancellation of thousands of operations, including many of my own lists. Does the Secretary of State agree that the opening of the dedicated Clare Marx surgical centre in Colchester, serving patients in Essex and Suffolk, is an extremely welcome development?

**Wes Streeting:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for the expertise and experience that he brings to the House. We absolutely need to ensure that we are innovating in our service provision, and are shifting the centre of gravity out of hospitals and towards care and treatment closer to home—indeed, in people's homes. As we have set out in recent weeks, since the investment announced in the Budget and particularly in the elective reform plan, this Government will continue to innovate, in order to provide services that deliver not only great value for the taxpayer but, even more importantly, great outcomes for patients.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): Research shows that ambulance response times in Haverhill in my constituency are twice those in Cambridge. We would like a new, co-located and purpose-built blue-light facility; the police and the ambulance service could use it to serve the town effectively, and it would hopefully save money. May I invite a Minister from the Department to come to Haverhill to meet me, the East of England ambulance service, Suffolk police and local councillors to discuss those plans?

**Wes Streeting:** I confirm that we are absolutely up for looking at co-location of different public services, to deliver both better integration and co-operation between different services—particularly the blue-light services that the hon. Gentleman mentioned—and better value for taxpayers. I will ensure that one of my ministerial colleagues makes contact with him.

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): The Health Secretary will know that University Hospitals Birmingham in my constituency recently declared a critical incident, which I am pleased has now been stepped down. Does he share my view that shifting the focus of healthcare from hospital to community as we rebuild our NHS would have a consequential impact on the number of people in hospitals, which are under immense pressure?

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. May I, through her, thank health and care staff in her city for the work they are doing to get the people of Birmingham through this particularly challenging winter? What we really need to do to make our health and care

system more effective and more sustainable is shift the centre of gravity out of hospital and into the community. We need better and faster access to diagnostics and treatment, as well as a bigger focus on prevention—primary prevention to keep us all healthy and active, and secondary prevention so that fewer people need to call on health services, and particularly emergency departments, which are stretched at this time of year.

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): I was pleased to hear what the Secretary of State said about vaccine roll-out, particularly of the RSV vaccine. I am even more pleased that my constituents in Richmond Park are diligent in taking up all vaccines, but they have been puzzled to find that the RSV vaccine is limited to those between 75 and 79 years of age. What plans are there are to extend the roll-out to those aged 80 and above?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for her question and for showing off her constituents' uptake—that is exactly what we want. Perhaps ahead of next winter, we should launch a parliamentary competition: who can boost uptake most in their constituencies? We will think about the prize.

More seriously, I am always glad when the pressure is to expand access to vaccines—that is exactly the sort of pressure that we want. We follow advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. We will review the experience this winter, and the JCVI will review evidence and data this winter and make recommendations, which we will take into account.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): The dire state that the last Government left the NHS in was all too apparent, tragically, to many of my constituents who needed it last winter. My 85-year-old constituent admitted with breathing difficulties had to wait over 30 hours in a chair because there were no beds available, and they were far from alone in that indignity and prolonged suffering. They should not have to tolerate it, and I certainly will not as their MP. I welcome this Government's action and leadership on ending the doctors' strike and investing in more appointments, but what more will the Secretary of State do to ensure that, next winter, many more of my constituents are not suffering from the same challenges?

**Wes Streeting:** I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for the spirit of his question. That is exactly how this Government are approaching planning for next winter. I want year-on-year improvement in NHS performance, particularly our response to winter pressures. Of course, there are seasonal variations in infectious diseases, inclement weather and all sorts of other pressures that can impact on NHS services, but the system should be resilient enough to withstand pressures in any given winter. It will take time to get back there, but that is why the Government are already planning for next winter, learning from experience—what has worked well and what has not—so that we can continue to deliver for the people of this country and improve the national health service and social care services.

**Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): One thing we could do to improve the situation in Maidenhead is to reopen the walk-in urgent care centre at St Mark's hospital so that we can keep people out of the big

hospitals and A&E and, as the Secretary of State said, help people get care closer to home. Will he meet me to discuss how we can work together to get the walk-in urgent care centre at St Mark's back open?

**Wes Streeting:** I welcome the hon. Member's question, and I agree with the thrust of his question that we need healthcare to shift from hospital into the community, with care closer to, and in, people's homes. The configuration of services locally is a matter for local NHS leaders. I encourage him in the first instance to be in touch with his local integrated care board. If he gets a particularly unsatisfactory or unreasonable answer, he should feel free to raise it with Ministers.

**Kevin McKenna** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments about the nursing colleague who was so brutally attacked in Oldham. I am thinking of her and her team at this time.

I have been thinking back to when I was starting out as a junior nurse. We faced the same problem—it was just after Labour had taken over from a Conservative Government, and the backwash of winter crises caused by that failed Government was very similar in the first few years. Improving staff pay and the NHS plan made a difference. What else has my right hon. Gentleman learned from the successes of his forebears about tackling this winter crisis now and tackling such crises in future?

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend brings expertise and experience to the House, and I am particularly grateful for his support and concern for the colleagues of the nurse who was so brutally attacked in Oldham, because I know that they will be acutely affected. In fact, the NHS workforce right across the country will have felt the shiver down the spine that I felt when I read about that horrific case.

My hon. Friend is right that I am fortunate to be able to call on every single one of my Labour predecessors, from Alan Milburn to Andy Burnham, to ask for their advice, experience and insight. As our great late friend John Prescott said, we need

“traditional values in a modern setting”.

I am bringing that modernising tradition to our approach to investment and reform, because the combination of both delivers results. That is how the last Labour Government delivered the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in history.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): The Secretary of State will know that Stepping Hill hospital in Hazel Grove has a repairs backlog reported to be £130 million. That means that local teams at Stepping Hill are under even more pressure to tackle the winter crisis. His colleague the Minister for Secondary Care, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), wrote to me and my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison), in October to agree that she was deeply concerned about the condition of healthcare infrastructure at the hospital. Following the Budget, when should we expect clarity on funding per hospital so that my constituents and Stepping Hill patients get the hospital that they deserve?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising those concerns on the Floor of the House. Thanks to the decisions that the Chancellor took in the Budget, the Department has an additional £26 billion

available for investment in our health and social care services, including estates. I cannot promise to fix the backlog that has built up over the past 14 years in a single budget year, but I can confirm that we will publish our mandate for NHS England and, following that, planning guidance and financial allocations, very shortly.

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Under the Tories' watch, our NHS became in danger of normalising failure, with patients treated in corridors, horrendous A&E waits and hospitals at risk of being gridlocked as they struggle to discharge patients. Will the Secretary of State continue to be up front and open about the challenges, and ensure that the NHS recovers year on year under his watch?

**Wes Streeting:** When I was sitting on the Opposition Benches at the tail end of the last Parliament, I saw my predecessor at this Dispatch Box telling us all the wonderful things that she thought the Government were doing and achieving. It was like hearing about a completely different national health service and social care system in another country. I arrived in July and was honest on day one that the NHS is broken but not beaten, and that these are crises of historic proportions that we will never sweep under the carpet, nor will we hide problems to spare political blushes. In the coming months and years, I will continue to be honest about where we have not yet fixed problems, and clear about the action that we are taking to get the NHS back on its feet and fit for the future and to build a national care service worthy of the name.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I think we all share the Secretary of State's aspiration to move healthcare out of hospitals and into the community. However, the two GP surgeries that I visited in Skegness just before Christmas are concerned that the impact of the national insurance increases on their staffing budgets will be around £100,000 per surgery, which will force them to reduce staffing capacity and, therefore, appointment capacity. What will the Secretary of State do to help those GP surgeries in that situation? There seems to be a conflict between the sensible aspiration and the practical reality.

**Wes Streeting:** There are 889 million reasons why GPs should be reassured about their financial sustainability for the year ahead—the £889 million allocation for general practice that I spelled out before Christmas, to provide reassurance to GPs when planning for the financial year ahead. I have been heartened by the response from GPs to that announcement, and I gently say to people who criticise the means of raising it that without the decisions that the Chancellor took in the Budget, we would not be able to invest £26 billion in our health and care services. We cannot have people welcoming the investment but criticising the means of raising it. If people do not support the Chancellor's decision—a perfectly reasonable political position to take—they will have to spell out what services they would cut or what taxes they would raise.

**Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I echo the Secretary of State's comments and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) on recognising the endeavours of health and

[Laurence Turner]

care staff during last week's extremely difficult critical incidents, and I also recognise the effect of contingency planning that had taken place, including the provision of additional beds at West Heath hospital in my constituency.

With respect to the central support the Secretary of State referred to, is he willing to make summaries of the support provided by NHS England to local trusts this year and in previous years?

**Wes Streeting:** I would be very happy to write to my hon. Friend to set out the support provided by NHS England to health and care services for his community, and I would be delighted to receive via him feedback from his health and care providers about what Government support they would like next winter and in future years.

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): I declare my interest as a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital, and I have a family member who has shares in a medical company.

The Secretary of State has a really tough job of clearing up the mess left in the NHS by the Conservatives, but some of the Royal Berkshire hospital estate is not fit for purpose and especially not fit to cope with the winter crisis. Can he confirm that a proper level of funding will be available to rebuild the Royal Berkshire hospital and that there will be no increase in the seven-year delay announced by the Conservatives in April this year? That will help with future winter crises.

**Wes Streeting:** I will take that as another representation from the hon. Gentleman on the new hospital programme, and I reassure him we will be setting out our review and its conclusions shortly.

**Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): As part of making the NHS fit for the future, moving some patient care from hospital to the community will be pivotal. In Doncaster, mayor Ros Jones and the council are already well on the way with this and they are setting up "Health on the High Street", which is good not just for patients but for footfall in the city centre. Will my right hon. Friend set out what his Department is doing to support areas such as Doncaster in delivering on this strategy?

**Wes Streeting:** I am delighted to hear of the work Ros is doing as mayor to support health and care services and to take health and care to where people are. I hate hearing that there are hard-to-reach communities; there are no hard-to-reach communities. There are underserved communities and, in our determination to tackle health inequalities, to get care closer to people's homes and indeed in people's homes, to do earlier diagnosis and to

provide faster access to treatment, we need to make sure that we take health and care services to where people are rather than expecting people to always come to us.

**Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): I fear that corridor care has already become normalised and, as the Secretary of State says, it will be some time before we get back on the right path. This week there have been reports of a north London hospital advertising for dedicated corridor care nurses. I also think about my constituent who is a doctor at the Royal Sussex begging X-ray teams to give her a consultation room so she does not have to do intimate exams out in the corridor. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give the NHS workforce that things are going to get better?

**Wes Streeting:** I am really grateful to the hon. Member for raising that question and for the example she gave of the Whittington advertisement for staff specifically to deliver corridor care. I make no criticism of the trust itself in trying to make sure it has the right staff in place to deliver the best care possible in the present circumstances. It is not the fault of the Whittington that there is corridor care; it is a legacy of 14 years of Conservative failure. I would also say that my reaction to seeing that advertisement was the same as hers: it was proof that corridor care has been normalised. I want to reassure her, the House and patients across the country that this Government will not accept corridor care as normal care. We will not tolerate it as being acceptable care. We will do everything we can as fast as we can to consign corridor care to the history books and I reassure the staff working in the NHS in these intolerable conditions that we will work with them to deliver the investment and the reform needed to get the NHS back on its feet and make it fit for the future.

**Mr Richard Quigley** (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): Despite the Conservative party's best efforts to ruin our NHS, will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to the hard-working NHS and social care staff in my constituency who, despite enormous winter pressure, are doing their best to go above and beyond to provide exceptional care and keep the NHS on its feet?

**Wes Streeting:** I thank staff on the Isle of Wight for everything they are doing to support communities across the island against a challenging backdrop. Since my hon. Friend arrived in the House he has been an extremely strong, loud and effective voice for the people of his constituency and across the Isle of Wight, and I look forward to working with him and health and care leaders on the Isle of Wight to make sure that they see their health and care services improving as a result of their decision to send a Labour Member of Parliament and a Labour Government here to serve our NHS and his communities.



## Higher Education Regulatory Approach

3.16 pm

**The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):** With permission, I shall make a statement on the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023.

In July 2024 I paused further commencement of the Act in response to concerns raised by a cross-section of voices. I took that decision because it is vital that we get this right. Our universities are one of this country's greatest strengths, and I know Members across the House share my pride in a truly world-leading sector. At the centre of that excellence sit academic freedom and freedom of speech. The ability of our academics to explore and express new ideas through teaching and research is precious and we must protect it.

These fundamental freedoms are more important—much more important—than the wishes of some students not to be offended. University is a place for ideas to be exposed and debated, to be tried and tested. For young people, it is a space for horizons to be broadened, perspectives to be challenged and ideas to be examined. It is not a place for students to shut down any view with which they disagree.

Here is our starting point: academic freedom matters and freedom of speech matters, and we will preserve those two pillars of national strength, but we will proceed in a way that actually works. That is why we have carried out extensive engagement covering all corners of the debate: academics, universities, students; those for the Act and those against. All voices were heard.

I was especially keen to consider the views of minority groups, to learn how the Act might affect them, particularly given the shocking rise in antisemitism on campus. Standing here in this great Chamber of debate, I remain resolute about the importance of free speech, but our engagement on the Act has raised concerns that any responsible Government must take seriously. What was being proposed simply did not rise to the challenge: unworkable duties on student unions, a tort clogging up the court system, and the Office for Students obliged to consider a vast number of complex complaints.

There are also serious concerns over the Act's potential impact on the welfare of minority groups. Many are worried that it could lead to increased harassment and discrimination on campus, and that the Act could push providers to overlook their safety. I share their concerns.

I reiterate that I am appalled by the rise in antisemitism on campus. In my view, rising antisemitism is best tackled through education, which is why I have confirmed £7 million in funding to tackle antisemitism in schools, colleges and universities.

I have reached a way forward that I believe is effective and proportionate, delivering an Act that is fair and workable. My decisions, subject to agreement from Parliament, will ensure that our higher education sector and the Office for Students continue to protect academic freedom and freedom of speech while ensuring the safety of minority groups.

I propose implementing key elements of the Act and returning others to Parliament for decisions on their amendment or repeal. I propose shortly commencing the following requirements currently in the Act: the duties on higher education providers to take reasonably

practicable steps to secure and promote freedom of speech within the law; the duty on higher education providers to put in place a code of conduct on freedom of speech; and the ban on non-disclosure agreements for staff and students at higher education providers in cases of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct. I also plan to commence the duties on the OfS to promote freedom of speech and the power to give advice and share best practice.

I will retain the director for free speech and academic freedom role, and I am pleased that Dr Ahmed will be staying on. I have complete confidence in Dr Ahmed. However, in my view, it is not right for this position to be a political appointee. The director should, of course, hold a deep belief in free speech and academic freedom, but their independence matters, and therefore their appointment must be free from any suspicion of political bias. Sir David Behan's review of the OfS, commenced under the previous Government, recommended we reconsider how all OfS executive and board appointments should be made. I will decide on that shortly.

While there is much in the Act that is valuable, there are provisions that I do not believe to be proportionate or necessary, and which will drain resources from providers and distract from the other important issues they face. It is therefore my intention to return to Parliament to seek the repeal of two provisions.

The first is the duties on student unions in the Act. Student unions are neither equipped nor funded to navigate such a complex regulatory environment, and they are already regulated by the Charity Commission. However, I fully expect student unions to protect lawful free speech, whether they agree with the views expressed or not. I also expect HE providers to work closely with them to ensure that that happens and to act decisively to ensure their student unions comply with their free speech code of conduct.

The second provision I will seek to repeal is the tort. I have heard the views in favour of the tort, and understand the arguments being made. However, it would create costly litigation that would risk diverting resources away from students at a time when university finances are already strained. Members can be assured that the remaining routes of redress have plenty of teeth—the Office for Students will have powers to take tough regulatory action where universities and colleges do not meet their duties. Ultimately, an Act needs to be workable for its teeth to bite. How would Conservative Members rather our universities spend their time and resources: by lawyering up, or by focusing on high-quality teaching and groundbreaking research? In fact, the fear of litigation could hurt rather than help free speech, as universities may decide against inviting challenging speakers to avoid ending up in court, and nobody wants that.

I have a message for vice-chancellors who fail to take this seriously: protect free speech on your campuses or face the consequences. For too long, too many universities have been too relaxed about these issues, and too few took them seriously enough—and that must change.

There are other elements of the Act that I am planning to retain, but, with parliamentary agreement, to amend. I propose keeping a complaints scheme in place with the OfS. It is an important route of redress for anyone whose academic freedom or free speech has not been protected, and there must be a route for righting wrongs. However, it must be proportionate: the OfS should have

[Bridget Phillipson]

the power to consider complaints, rather than a duty to assess every single complaint it receives, including those that are poorly put together or nonsensical. This way, the OfS will be freed up to prioritise the most serious complaints. I also want to remove the confusing duplication of complaints schemes for students. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator can already consider student complaints on free speech, and will continue to do so. The OfS complaints scheme will focus on complaints from staff, external speakers and university members.

I will also amend the OfS's mandatory condition of registration to give it flexibility in how it applies this condition to different types of providers. The OfS should have room to determine the best way to regulate on a case-by-case basis. That is the only way to deliver a sensible system that actually works.

Finally, I will take more time to consider implementation of the overseas funding measures. I remain fully committed to tackling cases of interference by overseas Governments, and the wider measures in the Act will further strengthen our protections. However, I want to ensure that any new reporting requirements for providers add value without being overly burdensome. We continue to work at pace with the sector on the wider implementation of the foreign influence registration scheme. My officials are working across Government and with the sector to review our response, and I will confirm my final decision in due course.

I intend to draft a policy paper to set out these proposals in more detail and will return to the House when it is ready. Where I am returning matters to Parliament, I will keep them under review in the meantime.

Our universities are leading lights of learning. They are spaces for vigorous discussion where people of all ages, faiths and backgrounds can come together to debate new ideas. I call on universities to promote a culture of disagreeing well. There is already excellent work going on across the sector, but we must see more.

Let me be clear that students have a duty as well: to embody that spirit of debate that makes our universities great, and not to simply try to cancel any views with which they disagree. This Government will secure freedom of speech in legislation that is practical, proportionate and workable, but legislation alone will never be enough. Freedom of speech is not easy. It is not just a right, but a responsibility. If we want a culture of debate that is robust yet respectful, challenging yet considerate, and strong yet civil, we must all do our part to nurture it. The freedom of speech Act provides a legal framework, but it is up to all of us every day to build a culture of truly free speech. I commend this statement to the House.

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

3.26 pm

**Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con):** I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 was passed by Parliament prior to the election. By the end of the Act's passage through both Houses, the Labour party had agreed in principle with the need for it; indeed, there are positive signals coming from those on the

Front Bench today. However, immediately after the election, Government sources said the Act was a Tory "hate speech charter", and paused its implementation. I ask the Secretary of State: what has changed? Does she still stand by her characterisation of the Act?

It should have been obvious straightaway to anyone with even a basic sympathy for the norms of liberal education that pausing the Act was a mistake. It should have been clear again, when more than 650 academics signed a letter to *The Times* decrying the decision, that pausing the Act was a mistake, but the Secretary of State still did not budge from her position. It should have been undeniable that the Government had made the wrong choice when, acting together, no less than seven Nobel prize winners and a Fields medallist later added their names to that letter, but still Labour was happy to roll out the old tropes about hate speech. Literary luminaries like Sir Stephen Fry, Tom Holland and Ian McEwan were forced to intervene. Those with natural sympathies for the Secretary of State's own political positions were compelled to tell her that she was wrong. It is only now, after all that humiliation, that she has finally changed her footing. I pay tribute to the academics who led that fightback outside Parliament.

Much like they have done with academies in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, this Government take a wrecking ball to policy without a thought for the consequences. They are much more interested in virtue signalling than in what is right for the country, more interested in listening to student union advisers than to women hounded out of their jobs. Since the Secretary of State decided to pause the legislation, gender-critical women, among others, have, in the process of vindicating their rights, racked up enormous legal fees that have caused some to remortgage their houses. Professor Jo Phoenix said publicly that if the Act had been enforced, it would have saved her from that very ordeal. Will the Secretary of State now apologise to those who have suffered because of her inaction?

We have upcoming legal action in the judicial review brought by the Free Speech Union against the Government's decision. Considering that a concern about expense was one of the reasons given by the Government to justify their decision, how much has that litigation cost to defend? What is the financial cost of the Secretary of State's inaction? How much taxpayer money has been spent on a partisan play-up-to-your-own-gallery move that is about to fall flat of its face in the court? Did the Secretary of State receive legal advice before she made her decision to suspend the Act? Will she release it, so that Members can see the basis on which she acted? If she did not, how can she possibly claim to have acted responsibly in this matter?

Despite the Secretary of State's statement, we now have confusion about what is actually happening. It seems that the Government cannot even do a much-needed U-turn properly. Without the tort, what consequences will universities face if they do not protect free speech? Why is the Secretary of State unable to set out a clear decision on overseas funding? Why is six months not enough time? Can she spell out the changes the Government are thinking about making to the overseas funding measure? Can she confirm that none of those were discussed during the Chancellor's recent visit to China? Can she confirm that there were no deals done to amend that section? That is very important. It is extremely

poor timing at best and invidious at worst to consider changes to the overseas funding element of the Act so soon after that trip to China.

It was always obvious that the Education Secretary made a mistake in pausing the Act, but rather than commencing a little more of the Act to try to cover up the mistaken delay, she needs to get up and perform the U-turn in full. The Act contains much-needed protections and she must not abolish them just because they came from the Conservative side of the House.

Finally, while we are at it, the Secretary of State should perform a U-turn on academy freedoms too. The Government must not take six months to realise their mistake on that one.

**Bridget Phillipson:** What we inherited from the previous Government was not a genuine attempt to solve a genuine problem; it was a mess designed to put party ahead of country. We saw a misplaced fascination with headlines for themselves, rather than a serious attempt to safeguard freedom of speech and academic freedom. It is precisely because this Government care about academic freedom and freedom of speech that we are determined to get this right, unlike the Conservative party. We are not content to leave it to vice-chancellors, who have done too little for too long. Universities must be places of robust discussion, where students' views are challenged and academic freedom is central.

One of my many predecessors in the previous Government, the former Member for Chippenham, was unable to set out how the then Government's proposals would prevent Holocaust deniers coming on to campus. Let me be clear: Holocaust denial has no place on campus or anywhere else in our society. The legislation would have emboldened Holocaust denial, and showed a shameful disregard for the welfare of Jewish students.

On the legal proceedings the right hon. Lady mentions, she was a member of the previous Government and knows very well that I am unable to comment on any aspect of that.

I said I would consider all options. I have done precisely that and have returned to the House, as I intended, to provide an update. If Conservative Members want to know what a U-turn on free speech looks like, I suggest they turn their attention to Liz Truss, who for so long extolled the virtues of free speech and is now on some bizarre quest to cancel the Prime Minister for saying that she and the Conservative party crashed the economy. Freedom of speech cuts both ways. What a bunch of snowflakes!

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

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for confirming the Government's approach to the implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, and I welcome the clarity that she has provided today.

The implementation of the Act will present some challenges for universities and for students. The Secretary of State will know that there can sometimes be a fine line between free speech and hate speech, and between statements of views and opinions and incitement or encouragement to violence or intimidation in the real world. Can she assure the House that she will ensure that universities and students are absolutely clear about

the limits to free speech, which are already enshrined in law, and that support will be provided on the interpretation of that when it is needed?

Professor Shitij Kapur, vice-chancellor and president of King's College London, has said:

"Universities are not there to function as a Speakers' Corner where anyone can stand up and express an opinion not necessarily supported by facts. If academic freedom is to mean anything, it must be accompanied by the academic obligation for ideas and claims to be accompanied by evidence and reason. Proponents have an obligation to engage and respond to those questioning their assertions and conduct that debate and discourse in a civil manner."

How will the Secretary of State ensure—particularly as the erosion of fact-checking and moderation on social media is taking place before our very eyes—that the implementation of the Act results in a high quality of evidence-based discourse conducted in a culture of civility?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her questions and her approach, and I look forward to discussing these issues with the Select Committee in due course should its members so wish.

My hon. Friend's point about disagreement is important. Free speech should be robust and we should be able to express our views, but all of us, especially those in public life, have a duty to ensure that we do so in a way that is responsible. As for the tort—this is at the heart of the issue that she has identified—I was concerned that the potential impact of legal proceedings and the financial consequences for providers of breaching their duties under the Act might have led to some providers unduly prioritising free speech that is hateful or degrading over the interests of those who feel harassed and intimidated. These issues can be finely balanced. We will provide further clarity through the Office for Students, but let me make it clear that academic freedom and freedom of speech are crucial tenets of our country's history.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Ian Sollom** (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement.

The Liberal Democrats fully support free speech, which, as several Members have pointed out, is at the heart of academic freedom, but it was clear from the start that this piece of legislation was not based on evidence, was not proportionate, and was fundamentally flawed. We welcomed the pausing of its implementation last year, and I welcome now the acknowledgement of its flaws and the Secretary of State's move to repeal the provisions on the tort and on student unions in particular. I must, however, press her on the fundamental question of why the Act is necessary.

Higher education institutions already operate within a legal framework to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for academic staff, students, employees and visiting speakers, and universities have already taken action to improve their policies and processes relating to freedom of speech. Universities UK, which represents over 140 universities, has reissued and expanded its guidance in this area, as well as having regular discussions with university leaders to support them with these challenges. Would the Secretary of State



[Ian Sollom]

consider taking a more meaningful step to ensure that students are safe, welcome and protected at universities by giving higher education institutions a statutory duty of care for their students?

The Secretary of State also referred to the well-documented fears of minority groups, particularly those in Jewish communities, that the Act in its previous form would allow a platform for extremist views, and she mentioned Holocaust denial. We had some indication of this in her statement, but will she provide more details of her plans to protect those from minority groups and communities on our university campuses?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising those questions. I will start where we agree, and then move on to where I might disagree with him.

I agree that freedom of speech and academic freedom are essential, but, sadly, we have seen too many examples of their not being upheld in the way that they should be by universities. The right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) raised a number of cases in which we have seen unacceptable practice, and some individuals have had to seek recourse through employment law when it should have been possible for them to seek redress sooner. That is precisely what we are seeking to deal with in ensuring that the Office for Students is able to focus on the most serious cases without being caught up in complex cases that could be less well founded or even nonsensical.

I want to be clear that we have engaged with people with a range of views on these topics, including those who hold gender-critical views, those who were in favour of the legislation and those who had concerns. That careful process of engagement with the sector, stakeholders and people with a range of views has enabled me to come to the House today and set out our approach.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call Mark Sowards, a member of the Education Committee.

**Mr Mark Sowards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. It is good to see that our universities will no longer be a battleground in which political parties seek to make headlines—unsuccessfully, I might add. Does she agree that now that she has taken decisive action on this issue, it is time to talk about the financial situation facing many of our universities, which threatens their very existence? We know that students are paying far more for far less at university, and we need to end that ridiculous cycle.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I agree with my hon. Friend that, across the board, there are big challenges in the university sector. That is why I took the difficult but necessary decision last year to increase the fees that they are able to charge. This year, we will engage in reform right across the sector to provide the long-term financial sustainability that is required. As my hon. Friend recognises, we on the Government Benches are clear that our universities are a central part of our local and regional economies, and a beacon of excellence around the world. That is why so many students from around the globe seek to come to our world-leading universities.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call Dr Caroline Johnson, a member of the Education Committee.

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I respect the Secretary of State's wish to ensure that she has considered the Act thoroughly. I regret that it has taken her so long to come to the conclusion that free speech is important, but I am glad that she has decided to bring into force many of the measures in the Act, which was introduced by the Conservatives. However, she has chosen to exclude student unions from the legislation. Can she say a bit more about how they will be held to account if they fail to keep in line with her desire to promote free speech?

**Bridget Phillipson:** On the timescale, this is a complex area, but in a little over six months we have consulted a wide range of stakeholders and considered all views, which is why I am able to return to the House today to update Members. The hon. Lady is right to say that we have decided not to commence provisions that will impose new duties on student unions. That is because some smaller providers have only a handful of members and do not have the resource or funding necessary to handle such claims, and they are already regulated by the Charity Commission. However, we fully expect student unions to protect freedom of speech, and providers to ensure that their student unions do so as well.

**Charlotte Nichols** (Warrington North) (Lab): I welcome the careful and considered approach that the Secretary of State has taken to this issue; it stands in stark contrast to when the Act was first brought forward. I refer the shadow Secretary of State, and indeed the House, to my comments in *Hansard* on 13 May 2021, when the previous Secretary of State explicitly confirmed on Radio 4 that Holocaust denial would be protected speech. In that vein, does my right hon. Friend share the concern of groups such as the Union of Jewish Students and the Antisemitism Policy Trust that the draft guidelines produced by the Office for Students risked undermining existing good practice in tackling antisemitism? Will she give an assurance that the OfS will meet Jewish representative organisations to ensure that such mistakes cannot be repeated?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am confident that the OfS, as the regulator, and its director for freedom of speech will seek to engage with a range of views, including those of Jewish students and community organisations, as they take forward this important work. That is certainly something that I have done to understand the concerns and the potential impact on minority students, including Jewish students, at a time when we all sadly know that antisemitism on our campuses and streets has been rising. As a country, we must do everything in our power to tackle that.

**Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): This screeching U-turn is welcome and I hope that, as the shadow Secretary of State says, it heralds a new period of humility and further change by the Government. The Secretary of State said that universities must protect free speech or “face the consequences”, but as far as I can see, she has removed those consequences. Could she please lay them out for us?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I know that the right hon. Gentleman is probably used to his party engaging in these discussions on quite difficult and sensitive issues in a rather reckless and irresponsible way, but we on these Benches take our

time to do this seriously and properly to make sure that we get it right, because this is such an important area. He will have heard from my speech—I will set out further detail—the requirements that will be in place through registration conditions, the fact that the Office for Students will be able to impose penalties on institutions, and the requirements that we expect of all higher education providers. My message to vice-chancellors and institutions today is that they need to do more, and they need to do it better.

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

**Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement and for the measured, practical and common-sense approach that it takes, which is in sharp contrast to what we are hearing on the Opposition Benches at the moment. Although we will always defend their right to their opinions, a right to their own facts is rather regrettable and their revisionism is quite astounding. I know at first hand the value of a university education. It is about having our views challenged. It is about critical thinking based on evidence and facts and having our horizons opened. Does the Minister agree that this foundation and the measures announced today are the right way to secure academic freedom in the future?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend, through his background in higher education, knows all too well how essential it is that young people and students from a range of different backgrounds are exposed to views that they might not previously have heard or that they might find difficult or challenging. That is what a university education is all about, and that is what we are determined to secure and protect through the statement that I am making today.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** We have substantial business to get through today before the House rises, so if questions are short I can get everybody in; if they are not, people are going to be disappointed.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House and setting out the revised position of the Government. I am particularly concerned about the removal of the tort, because it effectively removes the real consequences for people who disregard free speech and the consequences that could be imposed on an institution or organisation. If that is going to be the case, can she set out to the House what resources will be dedicated to the director of free speech? Let us hope this is not just a one-person fig leaf. How many people are going to be working for them? What resource will there be to ensure that free speech is protected?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to the former Secretary of State for his question. He will appreciate that this will be an independent regulator, and that there is a limit to what I can set out on their behalf. On the key issue of the tort, there will be consequences, even following the removal of the tort, for those providers who do not fulfil their duties under the Act. The OfS can already regulate providers in relation to free speech. It will be able to take regulatory action where there are breaches

of the duties under the Act, including monetary penalties if needed, and the complaints scheme will enable the OfS to make recommendations to providers that they will be expected to follow. Existing routes of redress through judicial reviews and employment tribunals will remain open, but we want the OfS to focus on making sure that there is a system in place that is workable so that complaints can be dealt with swiftly.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for this statement. I think freedom of speech is really important, but it should be done in an environment of shared respect, as it is most of the time in this place. I welcome this pragmatic approach to the process. Will she confirm that the previous unworkable legislation would have added additional financial stress to institutions?

**Bridget Phillipson:** It is important that any legislation in this area is fair, proportionate and workable, and that is what we have sought to achieve through the wider engagement and consultation that has taken place since July, when I paused commencement. It is vital that we get it right. It is incredibly important, and today we have given clarity to the sector around expectations into the future.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I welcome the words from the Secretary of State around freedom of speech today—she knows that I have asked about this in the House previously—and I also welcome the partial U-turn. Will she join me, though, in thanking the academics who have really put pressure on the Government to get to this position, and also the work of the Free Speech Union? Will she encourage all academic institutions to sign up to the Chicago principles? Can she give us a brief timeline on when the foreign influence registration scheme could come forward?

Finally, I will be setting up the all-party parliamentary group on freedom of speech in the coming weeks. Will the Secretary of State agree to come along and speak to us about this at some point?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am afraid I did not quite catch the very last part of the right hon. Gentleman's questions, but I will happily look in *Hansard* and return to him on that point.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I think he just wants to hear a yes to attending a meeting.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am afraid I am not going to do that without having reviewed exactly what the right hon. Gentleman said, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know him quite well. The Department for Education and the Home Office are looking jointly at some of these areas, and I want to be clear that national security is our No. 1 priority as a Government. I am grateful to all those who have engaged in good faith with the Department in this conversation. They hold a wide range of views: there are those who are for the Act and those who are against, as well as those with views somewhere in the middle and those with some new ones. I am grateful for their contributions to this discussion. I hope they can all see that we have taken this seriously and that we now have a workable plan to ensure that freedom of speech and academic freedom in our institutions are protected into the future.

**Matthew Patrick** (Wirral West) (Lab): Frank Field was a very good friend of mine. He believed deeply in seeking out disagreement with other people for a richer conversation, and in the importance of listening in good faith to arguments made in good faith. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should see that spirit across university campuses? How will her measures ensure that that is a reality?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I think we can all learn from Frank Field, who brought wisdom to a range of areas. We can all reflect on the need to keep our views under constant review to ensure that we challenge ourselves. The chance to be educated, whether at school, college or university, is a crucial part of challenging ourselves and understanding the world in all its many forms. These measures will allow university students to have precisely that experience.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I particularly welcome the emphasis on reducing burdens for universities, which will mean a lot to smaller institutions such as the smaller research-intensive institutions like Reading University in my constituency. Will she commit the Department to continuing to work with smaller research-intensive institutions?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes. One of the many brilliant aspects of our country's higher education sector is its diversity—smaller institutions, larger ones and those that bring a wealth of difference, having evolved and changed in different ways. We will continue to listen to and work with providers and institutions of all shapes and sizes across our country.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the shadow Secretary of State on the sheer audacity of coming to this place and pretending that hers is the party of free speech. It was her party that introduced the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014, the single largest restriction on free speech in the charity and voluntary sector, purely because the sector was saying things the then Government did not want to hear.

I encourage the Secretary of State to ignore the whines and the whinges, the gripes and the groans, of the Conservative party and carry on with what she is doing, because she is absolutely right. Universities are where people can challenge new ideas and hear things with which they may disagree. What advice is she giving to universities about the support they put in place so that students can explore these new ideas and have their own views challenged in a way that is safe and secure?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that freedom of speech cuts both ways, and Conservative Members would sometimes do well to reflect on that, too.

Sometimes, students can be exposed to views they find challenging or difficult, especially younger students who are newly away from home, and it is right that we put in place the right support. Institutions have invested a lot in mental health support and other provision. I think this also underlines the need to turn around the provision in the national health service, because I am

concerned about the extent to which providers are having to put in place additional support, above and beyond what should be a statutory requirement for every person in our country.

**Joani Reid** (East Kilbride and Strathaven) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and I particularly welcome the funding for tackling antisemitism on campus, which is a well-documented problem. When the original guidance on the Act was published, it took an approach to free speech that did not take account of the limitations on freedom of expression for minority groups that arise from hate speech.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism, I am particularly concerned about the risk of giving that hate implicit protection and amplification on campuses. Can the Secretary of State assure me and minority community representatives who have raised this issue with us that any future guidance will more carefully outline the importance of expression for all, including minority groups that are sometimes crowded out by loud, hateful voices?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I will ensure that my hon. Friend's point is taken up. Many have raised very serious concerns about antisemitism on campus and its impact on Jewish students, and I can see no good reason why any university would invite a Holocaust denier on to campus to deny the overwhelming evidence. Holocaust denial is an appalling form of antisemitism.

Yesterday, I joined the Holocaust Educational Trust in Parliament to make sure that, as we come to the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, we redouble our efforts to fight hatred and prejudice, including antisemitism, wherever we find it in our country.

**Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I declare an interest, not only as someone who has worked in the sector, but as a member of the freedom of expression organisation English PEN, which condemned the approach of the previous Government because it felt it would restrict academic freedom. Further, my constituent, who is a well-regarded economist, lost his job after publishing research into the impact of migration on coalfield communities. Will the Secretary of State assure my constituent that this Government are committed to academic freedom and to ensuring the stability of academic institutions?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I give my hon. Friend that assurance. That is also why, as one of the measures that I intend to return to, we must look again at the board and executive appointments to the Office for Students. It is right that concerns have been raised that there could be the suspicion of political interference given that, rather unusually for that kind of appointment, it involves a political appointee. People might regard that as fine if they agree with the views of the Government of the day, but I do not think that is a good principle on which we enshrine in law very important positions that are central to how we uphold academic freedom and freedom of speech in this country.

**Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and particularly in regard to the removal of the tort from the existing legislation. That will allow our universities to ensure that funds get spent on students and not on complex legal issues.



As the Secretary of State has said repeatedly today, the Government take the need to expose students to a wide range of issues seriously. As a former academic, may I ask my right hon. Friend whether she agrees with me that our universities must remain centres of robust, rigorous debate always?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yes, that is crucial. We know that the chance to study at university is life changing for so many students. That is of course the case for younger students—those who have what might be considered the more traditional experience of going to university at 18—but it is also about having the chance throughout life to return to education and training. That is what I have seen across so many institutions in our country. They put in place fantastic opportunities for upskilling and retraining later on in life, as people think again about how they want to go about things. I praise those institutions' fantastic work in driving growth and innovation, and in the months to come, we will work with them to ensure they can do more.

**Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): May I invite the Secretary of State to respond to the following statement that was shared by the Union of Jewish Students while she was on her feet?

"We support the changes brought forward by the Secretary of State. She has listened to the concerns we and others raised and has taken action. The result is that the Act will now be less likely to damage efforts to tackle anti-Jewish racism on campus. That should be welcomed by everyone."

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for sharing those comments. I pay tribute to the Union of Jewish Students for the amazing work it does every day to support Jewish students on campus and to ensure that their voices are heard, including at the

highest levels of Government. I give my commitment to UJS that I will continue to work with it and other student groups to make sure their voice is always heard. We as a Government are resolutely behind them in the fight against antisemitism in our country.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** For the final question, I call Dr Scott Arthur.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): As someone who was an academic until about 5 am on 5 July last year, I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for the leadership she has shown on this issue. I will ask a question in the context of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am proud of all the universities in Edinburgh and how they attract students from all over the world, but last year when I visited the Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation, which is the main synagogue in Edinburgh, I was ashamed to hear of the intimidation that Jewish students were facing in university. I was pleased to hear that universities are taking that seriously and I know that the Edinburgh Interfaith Association is too. Freedom of speech is an important right, but that should never extend to bigotry and hate. Does the Secretary of State agree that students should be free to practise their faith, always, and able to display their faith publicly, no matter what it is, without fear of intimidation?

**Bridget Phillipson:** That is absolutely essential. The same is true for Jewish students and others from minority groups as they go about their business at school and college. Sadly, I have heard too many examples of abuse and intimidation of the sort that my hon. Friend describes. Universities must be robust places of intellectual challenge and rigour; there is no good reason why students should feel intimidated or harassed in a place where they should find comfort, challenge and support.

## Point of Order

3.59 pm

**Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to raise an all-party parliamentary matter that is causing international ructions. Before Christmas, a report surfaced in the name of the all-party parliamentary group for the Commonwealth. Basically, to the annoyance of APPG officers and many members of the public, it was a hatchet job on the interim Government of Bangladesh. On a delegation to the high commission in London during recess, I was picked up on this. Even when I went to Bangladesh, the interim leader, Professor Yunus, a Nobel prize winner, also said, “What are your Government doing issuing these falsities in the name of Parliament?”

I wish to seek your advice on this, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can I get clarification on the significance of such things being issued? When I inquired into this, I was told that a pressure group had put out this report without final sign-off. So do these things constitute policy in any way, and is it right that a partisan organisation can hijack an APPG and then besmirch the name of our Parliament and our Government?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. She has put her point on the record. I am happy to confirm for the benefit of the House that all-party parliamentary groups represent a wide range of views across both Houses and their reports do not necessarily reflect the views of His Majesty’s Government or indeed of the wider membership of this House.

I now have to announce the results of today’s deferred Divisions. On the draft Electricity Capacity Mechanism (Amendment) Regulations 2024—[*Interruption.*] I can see that the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) is incredibly excited by this. As I was saying, the Ayes were 418 and the Noes were 78, so the Ayes have it.

On the draft Official Controls (Amendment) Regulations 2024, the Ayes were 423 and the Noes were 77, so the Ayes have it.

On the draft Clean Heat Market Mechanism Regulations 2024, the Ayes were 424 and the Noes were 109, so the Ayes have it.

[*The Division lists are published at the end of today’s debates.*]

## BILL PRESENTED

### OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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

Tim Farron presented a Bill to require that every child be offered at least one outdoor education experience during primary school years and at least one such experience during secondary school years; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 July, and to be printed (Bill 161).*

## Youth Mobility Scheme (EU Countries)

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

4.2 pm

**James MacCleary** (Lewes) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to enter into negotiations with countries which are members of the European Union for the purpose of extending the Youth Mobility Scheme to applicants from those countries on a reciprocal basis; and for connected purposes.

The immense damage caused by the Conservatives’ botched Brexit deal is clear for all to see. Few thought that young people would be able to go for two years to live and work all the way over in Japan, but not be able to hop across the channel to do the same in France. I am not sure that anyone voted for that kind of increased bureaucracy back in 2016. This Bill gives us the chance to send a different message to a generation of young people who have been denied the opportunities that so many of us in this Chamber took for granted when we were growing up. If we wanted to take a job or to study in an EU country, we could just go and do so. Opportunity and hope for the future have rarely been in such short supply in this country, and this is how we can provide some of both.

What I am proposing is a pragmatic, defined scheme that will once again allow young people across the UK to be able to spend time with our nearest neighbours without having to navigate a tangle of Brexit red tape. It is a youth mobility scheme with the EU that would open up opportunities for British young people to learn new skills, languages and cultures and bring all of that back with them to benefit our economy and our society. This would not be the UK’s only reciprocal youth mobility scheme. We have such arrangements in place already with Australia, Japan, New Zealand and Canada. They are familiar and tried and tested, allowing those aged 18 to 30 to live, work and study in the countries involved for a set period.

The Government have made much of their so-called missions. Mission No. 1, we are told, is economic growth, yet any proposal that might involve our European neighbours and contribute to boosting growth is dismissed. The UK is facing acute labour shortages, particularly in key sectors such as hospitality. These are exactly the kinds of jobs that young people visiting the UK for a few years might take on, whether while studying, immersing themselves in our culture or improving their grasp of our language. The situation suggests that this is a Government who are not serious about making the practical, hard-headed choices that would greatly benefit the UK economy and labour market in the long term, stimulating growth and improving the lives of British people.

The Government also talk up their reset with the EU, which, so far at least, seems to involve little more than warm words and a continuation of the previous Government’s attitude of seeing closer co-operation with the EU as a threat, rather than as a considerable opportunity to make Britain more secure and prosperous. Indeed, the Government have stuck so closely to the Conservative party’s script—or is it Reform UK’s script?—that Ministers have even mischaracterised, repeatedly in fact, a youth mobility scheme with the EU as a return to freedom of movement. That is categorically not what is

being proposed here. Any scheme would be time limited and involve a restricted cohort of eligible people. I truly hope that the Government will seriously reconsider their short-sighted and self-defeating position on the issue.

A number of hon. Members from across the House have rightly asked Ministers directly for an explanation of their refusal to explore such a scheme, yet no one has given a response that makes any sense. Meanwhile, the Government have tied themselves up in unnecessary red lines on Europe that do nothing to boost growth or support British businesses and young people. Even that cannot be used as an excuse, as this proposal does not breach any of those red lines.

The situation is having a real impact on young people growing up in this country today. Let me share Alex's story. A bright and ambitious 25-year-old from Taunton, Alex left university last year with the aim of working in a German fintech start-up. He had planned to move to Germany for a few years, then return home with a better understanding of the German language, and with the knowledge and skills to launch his own start-up here in the UK, but the hurdles proved insurmountable. He told me:

"I didn't want to move there forever, I just wanted a year, maybe two, to earn invaluable experience, polish my language skills and get to know German culture."

With no simple mobility arrangement in place between the UK and the EU, Alex ended up shelving his plans.

Not only did Alex lose out, our economy lost out too. The Government's failure to act risks closing the world to a whole generation of Alexes across the UK. It is also holding back British growth and prosperity. Let us take the UK's £82.5 billion tourism sector as an example. It has been grappling with the impact of the last Government's failure to address youth mobility with the EU. ABTA, a trade body representing the sector, reported a 69% drop in UK nationals working in European tourism roles in the five years after the EU referendum. Businesses that once offered transformative opportunities to young Britons now face rising costs and critical staffing shortages.

I have heard from one UK-based tourism company that once employed more than 400 young Britons a year. Mobility restrictions have forced it to drastically scale back its operations, undermining years of competitive advantage, and slashing training and employment opportunities for young UK workers. European Pubs, which runs bars and restaurants in France, previously relied on UK staff for most seasonal roles. Today, only 50% of its workforce is British. A youth mobility scheme, which recent polling shows is backed by a clear majority of British voters, could ease labour shortages, provide essential career pathways and help to safeguard our tourism sector's future vitality.

Meanwhile, our small and medium-sized businesses are really struggling, especially in sectors where staff shortages have become acute. Sectors from hospitality to the arts, entertainment and retail are desperately short of staff. With the UK's ageing population, that is unlikely to improve in the future. A youth mobility scheme would offer British businesses an excellent opportunity to address staffing shortages by welcoming young people from EU countries for a limited period, bringing fresh talent and energy to our workforce. With the threat of tariffs from the incoming President of the

United States, it has never been more important for our Government to break down barriers to opportunity elsewhere.

When speaking with counterparts in Brussels in my capacity as the Liberal Democrat Europe spokesperson, I have been struck by a clear message. After years of attempts to cherry-pick, the UK now needs to show that it is once again a trusted and reliable partner. By taking the lead on a youth mobility scheme, we have an opportunity to build that trust with our European allies that would allow us to explore our other priorities. Britain's ability to strike new deals on defence, agriculture and trade would falter if we sent the signal that we are unwilling to move on a pragmatic, mutually beneficial scheme like this one. A carefully designed youth mobility scheme would give the British people control. It would ensure that participants could come here only under a clearly defined category and a tightly controlled time limit, while also signalling that we value cultural exchange, business growth and an ongoing partnership with our nearest neighbours.

Let us be honest: we cannot afford to keep letting down young people like Alex, nor can we keep small businesses in limbo, forcing them to cope with staff shortages, when a scheme like this could do so much to help. Young people in this country already face unprecedented challenges: a housing crisis, low salary growth, a rising cost of living and high taxes on income. The very least the Government could do is to remove barriers preventing young people in the UK from living and working in the rest of Europe. It saddens me that the Government have so far ruled out such a scheme. I call on the Government to give the young people of this country a proper explanation. Many of them have put their faith in the Labour party to reverse the damage done by the previous Government but remain disappointed and frustrated.

The Bill calls for a solution that would restore vital opportunities for our young people who have been left high and dry by the Conservatives' botched Brexit deal. By embracing a well structured and controlled youth mobility scheme, we would send the powerful message that this country is serious about supporting our young people and backing British business with the labour force it needs to grow. This is a moment to bring opportunity and renewed good will back into the heart of UK-EU relations—a real reset. The issue will not go away and, as a Liberal Democrat, I am proud to have sponsors from the Green party, SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Alliance party of Northern Ireland. Many on the Labour and Conservative Benches know that a youth mobility scheme with the EU is the right thing to do. It is time to rebuild our relationship with Europe and set our young people free. I commend this Bill to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That James MacCleary, Tom Gordon, Siân Berry, Caroline Voaden, Stephen Gethins, Sorchá Eastwood, Sarah Olney, Liz Saville Roberts, Mr Joshua Reynolds, Richard Foord, Helen Maguire and Liz Jarvis present the Bill.

James MacCleary accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 July 2025, and to be printed ( Bill 160).*



## Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill

*Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee*

### New Clause 1

#### REVIEW OF IMPACT ON BUSINESSES, HIGH STREETS AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

“(1) The Secretary of State must review the impact of sections 1 to 4 of this Act on—

- (a) businesses,
- (b) high streets, and
- (c) economic growth.

(2) The review must consider—

- (a) the impact on different types of business, including small businesses,
- (b) the impact on businesses operating mainly or solely on high streets,
- (c) whether the provisions have had a measurable impact on economic growth, and if so what that impact has been.

(3) The Secretary of State must lay a report of the review before Parliament within six months of those sections coming into effect.”—(*Vikki Slade.*)

*This new clause would require a review of the impact of clauses 1 to 4 of the Act on businesses (including small businesses), high streets and economic growth.*

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

4.13 pm

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Review of impact of new multipliers*—

“(1) Within eighteen months of the day on which sections 1 to 4 of this Act are commenced, the Secretary of State must conduct a review of the impact of those sections.

(2) The review must consider—

- (a) the impact of the introduction of the lower multiplier on qualifying retail, hospitality and leisure hereditaments,
- (b) the impact of the introduction of higher multipliers in relation to a hereditament for which the value is £500,000 or more.

(3) The Secretary of State must, as soon as is reasonably practicable, publish the review and lay a copy of that review before Parliament.

(4) As part of the review the Secretary of State must consult with such parties as they see fit including—

- (a) businesses,
- (b) the Valuation Office Agency; and
- (c) Billing Authorities.”

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State, within 18 months of sections 1 to 4 of the Act being commenced, to review and consult on the impact of new multipliers.*

New clause 3—*Sections 1 to 4: impact assessment*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of this Act being passed, conduct an assessment of the expected impact of sections 1 to 4 of this Act on relevant businesses.

(2) The assessment must compare the amount of non-domestic rates expected to be paid by relevant businesses once sections 1 to 4 come into force with the amount paid in each financial year between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2026.

(3) The assessment must consider how the impact is expected to differ depending on the number of hereditaments a business occupies.

(4) The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report setting out the findings of the assessment.

(5) In this section, a “relevant business” is a business occupying a qualifying retail, hospitality or leisure hereditament.”

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State to examine the effect of the introduction of retail, hospitality and leisure multipliers on the amount of business rates paid by businesses occupying a single site compared with those occupying multiple sites.*

Amendment 9, in clause 1, page 2, line 5, at end insert—

“(1A) Regulations under sub-paragraph (1)(a) must provide discretion for billing authorities with regard to the application of the higher multiplier.”

Amendment 1, in clause 3, page 3, line 29, after “hospitality” insert “, manufacturing”.

*This amendment would add manufacturing businesses to the types of business that could qualify for use of the lower multiplier.*

Amendment 2, page 3, line 33, after “hospitality” insert “, manufacturing”.

*This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.*

Amendment 3, page 4, line 9, after “hospitality” insert “, manufacturing”.

*This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.*

Amendment 4, page 4, line 13, after “hospitality” insert “, manufacturing”.

*This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.*

Amendment 5, page 4, line 31, after “hospitality” insert “, manufacturing”.

*This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.*

Amendment 6, page 4, line 35, after “hospitality” insert “, manufacturing”.

*This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.*

Amendment 7, in clause 5, page 5, line 37, leave out from “persons” to end of line 38 and insert—

“who have special educational needs.

“(5A) In subsection (5) “special educational needs” has the same meaning as in section 20 (When a child or young person has special educational needs) of the Children and Families Act 2014.”

*This amendment would mean that a school that is wholly or mainly concerned with providing education to persons with special educational needs would not be a private school for the purposes of the Act, and as a result would retain charitable relief from non-domestic rates.*

Amendment 8, page 5, line 38, at end insert—

“, or

(b) has a religious character or other special character and there is no maintained school or academy of the same character within the specified distance from that school.

(5A) In sub-paragraph (5)(b)—

“religious character” has the meaning given under section 69 (Duty to secure provision of religious education) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998,

“other special character” has the meaning as defined by the Secretary of State by regulation,

“specified distance” is the distance specified under section 445(5) (Offence: failure to secure regular attendance at school of registered pupil) of the Education Act 1996.

(5B) Regulations under this section are to be made by statutory instrument.

(5C) A statutory instrument containing regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft instrument has been laid before and approved by resolution of each House of Parliament.”

*This amendment would provide that charitable rate relief would continue to apply to a school with a religious or other special character, if no maintained school or academy with the same character was within the statutory walking distances (as set in the Education Act 1996) from that school.*

Amendment 10, in clause 6, page 6, line 22, leave out “2025” and insert “2026”.

**Vikki Slade:** Business rates reform is long overdue. It is frequently cited by my constituents as the biggest concern for their businesses’ survival and one of the most direct inhibitors to their growth.

I was contacted this week by a constituent from a local business in Three Legged Cross, right on the edge of my constituency. He has been running it for over 40 years, and the cliff edge created by the small business rate relief means that his rates bill will go from £2,800 to £8,500 per year. The only thing that will save this microbusiness is systemic change as proposed by the Lib Dems in our manifesto, not a tax based on an arbitrary valuation that bears no relationship to the activity taking place inside his building.

High streets are trying to redefine themselves, moving from the heart of goods purchasing to literal shop windows as they struggle to compete against online competitors that do not have their overheads. It would be wrong to think that the solution is to try to return to the perfect high street of the past, as if such a thing exists.

I am old enough to remember C&A being the place me and my friends browsed for the latest fashions, and there was a Blockbuster video store and pic n’ mix from Woolies. Where are they now? It is dangerous and self-defeating to be caught up in toxic nostalgia, trying to reclaim the past as some kind of perfect place. Parliament must enact legislation that supports the society of tomorrow and towns that will work for a technological and multicultural age—indeed, an age in which people can no longer afford the stuff that we used to buy on a Saturday afternoon, or are choosing, as I do now, to buy their stuff from second-hand stores.

The dangerous gap between the slashing of retail hospitality and leisure relief by almost half, and a regime that brings in as yet undefined new multipliers, brings real risk. Our new clause 1 would require a review of the impact of clauses 1 to 4 on businesses, on high streets and on the real prize of economic growth that the Government mention so often. There has been a lot of talk in recent months about decisions being made without clear impact assessments. As we move through a period of reform, enshrining such an assessment in law, rather than questioning later whether it has been done, would save us all a lot of trouble and demonstrate that the Government genuinely want to make improvements.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): One issue that the hon. Lady has not yet mentioned is the impact of the Employment Rights Bill, which will create further red tape for our high street businesses when it comes into play. Do the Liberal Democrats think that the Government should consider that? Changing taxes and rates is one thing, but creating red tape at the very same time, constraining business growth, is another.

**Vikki Slade:** I agree that this is a difficult time for small businesses, with so many things changing at the same time—not least the increasing national insurance rates.

To return to the role of the high street, the most successful high streets are moving quickly to reinvent themselves. Since my election, I have been trying to find a high street location for my constituency office. I had decided to base myself in the historic market town of Wimborne, where my mum lived and my children went to school. It is the fastest-growing community in Mid Dorset and North Poole—Ministers have heard me talk about its housing problems many times—and it has great bus routes. I thought it would be a great place to find a small unit easily.

I was wrong, however. The strength of the sense of place, the innovation of its businesses and the hard work of its business improvement district and its town council are such that when a business closes down, others are waiting to move in. I have finally found my new home, which will open by the end of the month when we have fitted it out, but the experience proved what I already knew: the high street can survive, but only when the business community is prepared to give people what they want. Retailers such as Tickles and Co. trade alongside the hospice shop, and old businesses such as Bartletts, which has for 120 years sold smart clothes for all seasons, are able to sustain themselves despite changes in the market.

The Lib Dems welcome the proposal to permanently reduce business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure, and we acknowledge that the financial situation the Government were left by the previous Government makes the 75% discount difficult to maintain, but any discount is worthless if businesses that are trying to stabilise following the covid pandemic, the energy crisis and the shift to online cashless purchasing do not even make it through the next year. As I have said before, that is not the reform that business needs. The Minister has already said that this is just phase 1, but we are incredibly frustrated that he has not taken the opportunity to take things further.

New clause 3, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), focuses our proposals further on the retail, hospitality and leisure sector, and raises valid points about the risk to individual businesses compared with those that have multiple branches. There must be an assessment of that risk alongside a broader impact assessment.

**Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): My hon. Friend is giving an impassioned speech about the importance of business rates reform. Does she agree that there is a risk of unintended consequences in what the Government are proposing? At the moment, the 75% relief is capped at £110,000, but when the relief goes to zero in two years’ time, that cap will not exist. House of Commons Library research shows that the net effect could be that small businesses end up being 80% worse off, while big chains such as Starbucks could be 40% better off. Although it is important that we get a review of the impact of business rates, it is also important that we get the differential assessment set out in new clause 3.

**Vikki Slade:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. One problem is the same law of unintended consequences that we have seen with things like the national insurance

increase—which, as we repeat over and over again, is impacting small businesses, hospices, doctors' surgeries and things like that—when quite understandably, an attempt is made to raise funds from elsewhere.

I want to share the views of Anthony Woodhouse, the chair of Hall and Woodhouse brewery and pub chain, founded and based in Dorset but with a branch just across the way from this place—unfortunately, I am not able to be at its event in Portcullis House because of the timing of today's debate. Anthony told me that the revaluing of property when a huge amount of money has just been invested to make it fit for a changing market, and before you have even had a chance to benefit from that market, is completely crazy and discourages business investment. As such, it is important that as we look to reform business rates, we examine that issue as well.

Despite our failure to do that, businesses such as Anthony's are responding to the market. Pubs such as the Olive Branch in Wimborne and the Old Granary on Wareham quay are now places where muddy boots, children and dogs are welcome, and where they sell as many cups of coffee as pints of local beer. The high street needs to morph as businesses have—to be ready and willing to change—but while business rate reform rightly starts with the high street, it is important that it does not end there.

As such, I turn to our amendments 1 to 6, which would add manufacturing businesses to the lower multiplier. The UK has a rich history of manufacturing excellence, and Barclays' "Made in Britain" report found that a product being made in Britain held an important influence over consumers' decision to purchase it, with customers perceiving such products to be high quality, reliable and internationally respected. The "made in Britain" tag was found to be worth an addition £3.5 billion a year to our UK exporters, which is why we believe that the lower multiplier should also apply to manufacturing businesses. We need to give those businesses a shot in the arm to ensure they can compete on the world stage. The threats by incoming President Trump to put tariffs on UK products, our continued isolation from our neighbours through an inadequate Brexit deal, and the rapid growth of economies such as China and India represent a real threat to local manufacturing.

Poole Bay Holdings, based in my constituency, stands ready to produce its innovative Koolpak here in the UK. Anybody who has children will know the brand Koolpak—it is that ice pack that is not even ice—and that business has been modifying its equipment so that it can make the product here, in Dorset, to compete with China. It stands ready to drive up those sales. Recognition of such businesses through a lower multiplier, or at least the potential to include them in a lower multiplier if the market becomes more tricky, is the intent behind our amendments.

Turning to amendments 7 and 8, which stand in the name of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), the Liberal Democrats simply do not believe in the taxation of education. Alongside the changes to VAT, the removal of the special status for schools is really disappointing. Therefore, those amendments—which seek to recognise the value of schools for children whose needs are difficult to meet elsewhere, whether those are special educational needs and disabilities or whether people are choosing to educate in a faith school—seem reasonable.

In summary, this Bill is a fair start, and some businesses will feel it is better than the abyss that might otherwise have been. However, the Government could and should have taken different decisions to protect businesses that will face additional costs in just a few weeks' time. We are often asked how we would pay for it; I welcome that discussion, as there were many proposals in our manifesto, from taxing big banks to asking gambling companies to pay their fair share. On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I recognise that the Government have worked quickly to bring this Bill forward, but the risks of losing businesses en route to something better are just too great. We need proper reform, so that the businesses of the mid-21st century can weather the storms ahead.

**Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak again on this Bill, having been part of the scrutiny process in Committee.

The Committee heard representations from a wide variety of experts in related fields, and I was heartened by the news that many experts felt that this Bill would have a positive impact on 98% of the retail stores that make up our communities. In particular, small convenience stores such as the local Co-op or the great British corner shop will see great benefits to their capacity to support staffing, security and other operational functions. Our incredible independent shopkeepers, such as those who populate the high streets of Ilkeston and Long Eaton in my constituency, will have more funds to take on additional staff, improve their security set-ups and gain long-term confidence in their ability to serve our community. These measures represent a simple, common-sense approach to rebalancing the scales in favour of local retailers and away from the online giants, and increasing taxes on the biggest players while relieving the burden on local retailers.

**Daisy Cooper:** The hon. Member may have heard my earlier intervention. He is absolutely right, and I agree with him wholeheartedly, that we have to shift the burden away from small businesses on to big online retailers. However, that could be undermined if all we do is shift the burden on to the big chains. House of Commons Library research says that small independent businesses are going to end up subsidising the big chains. Does he share my concern that this could be an unintended consequence and that the Government must look at it?

**Adam Thompson:** I refer to *Hansard* for the discussions we had in Committee, but that did not come through in the evidence we heard. However, I respect the fact that the hon. Member has made that point, and I thank her for doing so.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), another sector to benefit significantly from these measures is our local pubs. The fine folk frequenting the Sawley Junction in Long Eaton or the Bulls Head in Breaston in my constituency can rest easy that their locals are in safe hands. More generally, the measures we are bringing forward will reduce the tax burden on the hospitality sector, which is considered by many to be overtaxed. I am very glad that the Government have been able to offer something positive to the sector, which has been broadly forgotten for many years.

Some of the Bill's opponents have suggested that the removal of charitable relief from non-domestic rates for private schools will have a negative impact on the parents



of privately educated children, so I was strongly heartened to hear from one of our experts during the scrutiny process in Committee. Professor Francis Greene, professor of work and education economics at the University College London institute of education, noted that this Bill will have a “marginal” effect on the education sector, and that the policy was fair and would generally not have a great deal of impact on the proportion of children in private schools, which has remained broadly constant over the past 20 years, despite a cash-terms doubling in fees.

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): Would the hon. Gentleman like to reflect on what he has just said, which is that the proportion of children going to private schools has stayed constant? Even the Government’s own analysis does not say that. It says that the number has stayed broadly constant, and in fact the proportion has come down.

**Adam Thompson:** If I am incorrect, I stand corrected. My understanding from speaking to the experts is that the proportion has remained broadly consistent, but my apologies if that is incorrect. I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention.

The Committee stage reaffirmed what many of us on the Government Benches already knew, which is that this Bill represents a common-sense modification of our tax policy that will support local small businesses. The Bill represents a core pillar of this Government’s goal to rebalance the scales away from large online giants in favour of local independents and towards the 94% of children educated in the state sector. I know that traders and families in Ilkeston, Long Eaton and the surrounding villages in my constituency will broadly benefit from these measures, and I am proud to support this Bill through its remaining stages unamended.

**Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I intend to confine my remarks to two specific amendments—amendments 3 and 10, on private schools and special educational needs and disabilities—that would delay the introduction of this tax hike so schools have more time to plan financially.

Schools in my constituency have been punished by a series of tax rises since this Labour Government took office in July. By adding VAT to private school fees, and now by ending their charitable business rate relief status, Labour is attacking aspiration. These tax hikes will not hurt the wealthiest. It is the people who have scrimped and saved to send their children to a school of their choice who will be hit the worst. Labour seems to believe people should not have a choice over where they send their child to school, as is evident in their similarly misguided Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is making its way through this place.

Schools will close because of this tax hike, and I know this because it is happening in my constituency of South Northamptonshire. Carrdus school, founded in 1957, survived the cold war, the winter of discontent, the global financial crisis and three Labour Governments, yet it could not withstand the tax onslaught from this Chancellor and it will close its doors at the end of the summer term. That will mean 120 pupils flooding back into the state system, which is already struggling with capacity issues, at a huge cost to the taxpayer.

**Adam Thompson:** Will the hon. Member reflect on my comments a few moments ago about how the expert suggested that the Bill would have a marginal, negligible impact on the education sector?

4.30 pm

**Sarah Bool:** That may be the evidence that you have received in this instance, but I am giving the real-life proof. When I spoke to the headteacher about this, she said that the increase in national insurance on teacher costs, which are about 80% of outgoings, in combination with all the other things, has had a huge impact and the school will have to shut. It will be closing its doors at the end of July, which is a travesty.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. You said the word “you”, but I did not ask the question.

**Sarah Bool:** My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker; I would not dare say that about you.

If the Government are intent on punishing my constituents’ aspiration for the future of their children, the least they could do is grant the concessions that the Conservatives are asking for in all our amendments, and specifically those in amendments 7 and 10. Amendment 7 would exempt private schools that wholly or partially provide education for children with special educational needs and disabilities who have not yet obtained an education, health and care plan, or whose needs are established but not so severe as to require one. SEND support in schools helps pupils with a level of need below that of an EHC plan. Restricting relief only to those settings that provide for the most severe needs is out of step with the rest of our education system. Many families, on not being successful in applying for an EHC plan, or indeed enduring huge waiting times for the local authority to put one in place, opt to send their children to a private school. We should not punish families who choose to do what is in the best interests of their children.

Amendment 10 would delay the introduction of this tax hike for a further year to allow schools to plan their finances accordingly. That is just plain common sense. It would mean fewer schools like Carrdus having to make the unenviable choice to close their doors.

**Dr Luke Evans:** My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head: there is a timing issue. The Labour Government were explicit and up front on this tax rise in their manifesto, but they claim that they care about children’s education and welfare. If so, why would they implement the change halfway through an academic year? The hon. Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) just turned around and said, “Well, it doesn’t matter because it’s 120 kids in the Member’s constituency.” Actually, it really does matter, because every single child’s education matters. Does my hon. Friend agree that even if those are small amounts at the margin, it is completely justifiable to delay the measure as the schools, the experts and the parents have asked for?

**Sarah Bool:** I totally concur with my hon. Friend, who made the point powerfully. The impact goes beyond the 120 individual students to their parents’ arrangements and how they work. The headteacher of the school has a husband who was also a teacher, and they face a huge

impact in respect of what they will do with their children and whether they can manage to make new school place arrangements. This policy is terribly misguided. We really need to think about what we are doing. It is a travesty that we will lose a school.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Member give way?

**Sarah Bool:** No, I will keep going if the hon. Member does not mind.

I do not want to see any other schools close or any other children suffer as a result of this plan. I hope that colleagues across the House will join Conservative Members in supporting our amendments.

**Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in favour of the Bill, which is a significant piece of legislation that aims to reform the non-domestic rating system in England. I welcome the Bill's primary objective of creating a fairer and more balanced approach to non-domestic rating. By increasing the multipliers for large businesses, we will ensure that those entities contribute their fair share to the local economy. That change is particularly important as it addresses the disparity between large corporations and smaller businesses, which often struggle to compete under the current system.

The introduction of lower multipliers for retail, hospitality and leisure properties is a much needed relief for those sectors, which have faced significant challenges, especially in the wake of the covid-19 pandemic. By reducing the tax burden, the Bill aims to support recovery and growth, ultimately benefiting local communities and economies such as the hospitality and retail sector in my constituency.

One of the most notable aspects of the Bill is the removal of charitable relief for private schools. Although private schools play a role in our education system, it is essential to recognise that they operate as businesses and should be taxed accordingly. This change will generate additional revenue that can be invested in public services, including state schools. The Bill represents a step towards a more equitable and balanced tax system. It addresses the needs of various sectors, supports local economies and ensures that all entities contribute fairly to the public good.

**Damian Hinds:** There are problems with all taxes, which is why we end up with a blend of taxes. For businesses, there is tax on payroll, sales, profits and property. However, business rates are a particularly difficult and unpopular tax because they represent a fixed cost on the business that does not vary when the economy goes up or down, or according to the particular company's success or growth, or a contraction in its sales or profits.

Over the years, I have heard many times from businesses in Alton, Petersfield, Horndean, Clanfield, Liss and elsewhere in East Hampshire about a desire for business rates reform. I am sure that a lot of small business owners were very attracted to what they heard from the Labour party—that it would scrap business rates altogether. The Labour Government do not say that any more, but they still want us to believe that they are undertaking some great reform and cutting rates for our high street businesses. I am afraid it is all smoke and mirrors, because for those businesses, including the

ones name-checked by the hon. Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson), the big effect that they feel right now is the cut in the relief for retail and hospitality business—not a small one, but from 75% to 40%.

It would be bad enough if that was all businesses faced, but it is not. They have to cope with all sorts of difficulties the whole time. We have rising labour costs—we support the increase in the national living wage over time, but not a hike in employer national insurance contributions at the same time. Because of what is happening to the threshold, there will be a massive effect on part-time workers. That will be very difficult for retail and hospitality businesses to swallow.

In and of themselves, the cuts to the multiplier for high street businesses are welcome, but we must remember that they are balanced by increases elsewhere in the system. Sometimes, Government Members talk about big businesses and corporations as some unwelcome part of our economy, but they are the biggest employers in the country and are fundamental to our economy. In the Red Book, these changes involve increases of hundreds of millions of pounds in business rates. Who will the increased rates affect? They will affect large supermarkets—a sector that is one of the biggest employers in the country—and hotels, which are a really important employer, as well as being fundamental to travel and tourism. Will the Minister also say a word about the expected effect on the national health service?

The blurb on the Budget says, “We are going to attack distribution centres, including those used by online retailers.” The word “including” does a lot of work in that sentence, because high street retailers also have distribution centres, and the changes will add to their costs, fuelling inflation on food and everyday consumer goods.

**Dr Luke Evans:** My right hon. Friend is making an excellent observation on the impact of these costs. We know from the surveys that 75% of businesses will pass on the costs to the very people who use them. They will have an inflationary impact on the public. Does he agree that it is imperative that we think about that?

**Damian Hinds:** As ever, my hon. Friend is spot on. In the end, there is no such thing as a tax on business—you cannot tax a business; you can only tax people. Any tax on business is ultimately a tax on its employees, its customers or its owners. Before somebody jumps up and starts talking about the owners, the owners are often pension funds who are then paying out the pensions for our mums and dads.

My point is that these business rate increases will mean higher costs for bricks-and-mortar companies as well, which come on top of all the other changes, in particular the hike in employer national insurance contributions. And this from a Government who yet again this week keep talking about their growth agenda. It makes me wonder what is actually written in that growth agenda.

Overall, the effect of all these changes—we need only look at the Budget Red Book—is that the revenue from business rates is projected to increase from £32 billion this financial year to almost £40 billion in five years' time. It is a massive further tax raid on business, and a brake on employment and economic growth.

**Daisy Cooper:** The right hon. Gentleman is giving an impassioned speech about the case for an overhaul of the business rates system. Why did the previous Conservative Government never get around to doing that?

**Damian Hinds:** Well, I did refer at the start of my speech to the calls over the years for reform. I also said that there are problems with all taxes we levy on individuals or on business and that is why we end up with a blend. What I am talking about now is the fact that this Government are hiking up the total amount that will be taken in business rates, which will fall on major employers and then be felt in our unemployment rate. The Government are trying to do this thing of saying, “We are cutting stuff,” but they are not, because for all of the companies we have heard name-checked, reducing the relief will outweigh the effect of the multiplier. On top of that, we have a revaluation coming up in the near future. That is probably going to mean an increase in rateable values that will compound those higher multiples.

For all those reasons, new clause 2 is both important and a reasonable ask. It says that after a period of time, we should review the real-life effect of these changes and give the Government an opportunity to change course and get back to something that looks a bit like a growth agenda.

I turn briefly to the effect of these changes on independent schools. We have debated in the Chamber on a number of occasions the Government’s overall approach to independent schools. Let me say again that we object in principle to taxing education. It makes us almost unique in the world that we would do such a thing and it will be the first time in our national history that we have done so—it has never been done before by any Labour Government, or any other Government. The tax change we are debating today on rates is not the only tax change or transfer of money from independent schools to the Treasury. They were already facing a big increase—5%, I think—in employer contributions to the teachers’ pension scheme. Like all organisations—public sector, private sector, charitable and voluntary sector—they also have employer national insurance contributions to deal with. And then there is the enormous VAT change.

Specifically on this tax change, it is a fixed cost, as I mentioned at the start of my speech, at a time when there is all this uncertainty around the independent education sector and children will be moving. I will let Members into a secret: no one knows what the ultimate effect will be. We can line up as many experts as we like, but no one knows how many children will be moving, but we know it will be a non-trivial number greater than zero—there will be children moving out of that sector and there is a lot of uncertainty. It therefore seems to be a very unwise time to add, on top of all those other tax changes, a significant change to a fixed-cost tax. The amendments put forward by the official Opposition are therefore very well worth supporting; my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) made that case very strongly.

On faith schools, we know that whatever the impact assessment says, people of faith, and particularly of smaller faiths, will be disproportionately impacted by this Government’s changes to education. We also know that children with SEND feature particularly prominently in the independent sector. Many of those schools have an awful lot of children who have special needs, but not

necessarily—or not yet—an education, health and care plan. Special consideration should be given to both those types of schools: faith schools—if we wanted to narrow it down further, we could say smaller faiths charging low fees to parents—and those catering to children with special educational needs and disabilities.

On amendment 10, with all else that is going on in the independent sector, it is at the very least an exceptionally reasonable ask of the Government that we delay these changes by a year to give the sector a chance to be able to cope and plan.

4.45 pm

**Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Thank you for allowing me to take part in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. Having been a member of the Bill Committee—my first Bill Committee in this place—I appreciate being able to contribute on Report in the Chamber.

Southall town centre is well known the world over as a great place to shop for an Asian wedding, with stunning lehengas, saris and sherwani on sale all down the Broadway, King Street and South Road. During the election campaign, I vividly recall seeing two clothes shop workers eating their lunchtime rotis behind the counter. When I commented that business must be good, they both said no. They said that a few years ago, they would never have had time for lunch, and would have worked right up until closing as they were so busy. They told me that they were suffering from being undercut by online retailers because they were paying through the nose for business rates, facing blitz robberies with no police around to respond, and constantly having to chase bigger businesses for payments.

It is ironic that the previous Government have suddenly decided they back local businesses after 14 years of ignoring their pleas. In fact, the only businesses they supported were the rail companies that could not run the trains, the water companies that could not keep our water clean, and, of course, the private sector mates they handed out dodgy covid contracts to. Indeed, the former Prime Minister and former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, Boris Johnson, reportedly used a four-letter word beginning with f when making it clear how little he cared about business.

In contrast, this Labour Government are backing local businesses. We are already ensuring that suppliers pay small businesses within 30 days, and we are cracking down on retail crime, too. The Bill will deliver on our promise to ensure a fairer system of business rates that will help brick and mortar shops like those in Southall to compete with online companies. Finally, we will have a permanently rebalanced system that will stop local shops being undercut and stop the slow death of our high streets and town centres.

New clauses 1 to 3 and amendment 9 are all things that are already happening. We are already publishing a review of these measures as part of next year’s Budget, and there is already discretion for local authorities to look at the higher multiplier rate. Amendments 1 to 6 would add manufacturing to the Bill, which would, in my belief, dilute its effect. We have already prioritised manufacturing as part of the Budget, investing £3 billion into aerospace, automotive and the life sciences industries. We make no apologies for using this Bill to prioritise town centres.



Amendments 7, 8 and 10 all seek to either dilute or delay the changes in the Bill. The Bill already exempts all private schools that are wholly or mainly focused on educating children with special educational needs—that is already in the Bill. We know, however, that 93% of children in this country go to state schools. Politics is about priorities. Just as we are prioritising town centres in the Bill, we are also prioritising those 93% of children. Unless the Conservatives think it is okay to have children in state schools taught maths and science by unqualified teachers, they need to say where they would get the money from otherwise.

Although the Bill is about a fairer system of business rates that will help local businesses, many on the Opposition Benches have raised the issue of employer national insurance. Some 93% of businesses in Ealing Southall are microbusinesses. Most of those businesses will either pay less employer national insurance or the same as they currently pay. Some businesses will pay more national insurance, but that is because the previous Government ran up a massive £22 billion credit card bill making rash promises they did not even attempt to keep, while running public services into the ground. When the final demand letters started coming, they hid them in the back of a drawer and pretended everything was fine. Employer national insurance increases for some businesses will help us to pay for the triple lock on pensions, thousands of extra hip and knee operations, and more police on our streets. Again, unless the Conservatives think it is okay to reduce pensions in real terms, let waiting lists go up and up and give our streets over to criminals, they need to say where they would get the money from.

Before Christmas, I met the brewer Heineken at its pub the Star and Scorpion in west Ealing. Labour has already taken a penny off a pint in the Budget and our decision in the Bill to permanently lower business rates for retail and hospitality businesses will help to further protect local pubs like the Star and Scorpion. Without the Bill, the bars and restaurants of west Ealing and Hanwell would be facing a cliff edge in April, with big increases in their business rates as the sticking-plaster solution that the previous Government came up with ends. The Bill both extends temporary reductions in business rates for high street businesses and introduces a new permanent scheme that will level the playing field between the high street and the internet.

The one tax that the Opposition do not mention is the 10p crime tax: 10p added to every shopping basket due to the impact of shoplifting. The Tories did absolutely nothing about that, but this is a Tory tax that Labour is getting rid of. We are investing in neighbourhood policing, scrapping the Tory shoplifter charter that allowed thefts under £200 not to be investigated, and bringing in a new offence of assaulting a shopworker.

The Conservatives had 14 years to help out local businesses like those in Ealing Southall. Instead, they trashed our economy, destroyed public services and stifled business growth. The Labour Government are clearing up their mess. Through this Bill, we are ensuring fairer business rates for shops, restaurants and bars on Ealing Southall's high streets.

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I, too, served on the Public Bill Committee and would like to put on record my thanks to all the witnesses who attended and gave evidence.

The Bill shines a light on how politics is about choices. At the general election, we promised a Labour Government that would make different choices: choices rooted in fairness and a commitment to levelling the playing field. Today, the Bill is a powerful example of how we are going to deliver on that promise. This is a Bill about the politics of equity. It is about ensuring that everyone—from small business owners to schoolchildren in Wolverhampton North East—has a fairer chance to succeed. For too long, the scales have been tipped in favour of the largest corporations, online giants and private schools, while businesses and state schools have been left to shoulder an unfair burden. The Bill changes that. We are delivering a permanent reduction in business rates for the hard-working small businesses that are the backbone of Wolverhampton North East. My constituency does not include a city centre, but it does contain plenty of brilliant small businesses: fantastic cafés, restaurants, beauty and hair salons, a micropub, larger pub chains and family-run shops. These businesses are the heart of our community.

For years, high streets have been forced to compete unfairly with massive online retailers and retail parks, but the Bill will ensure that the largest online retailers, supermarket chains and distribution warehouses finally pay a fairer share. Small businesses in Wolverhampton and Willenhall will now see permanent lower business rates, freeing up resources to invest in their workforce, improve security and grow. As Paul Gerrard of the Co-op has pointed out, this reform will strengthen the viability of small shops, ensuring that they can continue to provide jobs, beef up security, and uphold their community-centred values. The Association of Convenience Stores has said that these changes will save small stores money that can be used directly to hire more staff, install new CCTV, and invest in the future.

The Bill is, however, not just about businesses; it is about fairness in education. Private school fees have risen by about 55% in real terms over the last 20 years, while state schools' funding has largely flatlined. State schools and academies are paying business rates right now while private schools enjoy business rates tax breaks, and that is simply unfair. This is the reality. Almost 50% of private school students achieved top GCSE grades this summer, compared with just 20% in state schools. Sports facilities in state schools are crumbling, with fixtures cancelled owing to a lack of minibuses or drivers. Private schools have more swimming pools than all the state schools, further education colleges and higher education institutions put together. Just 35% of children from low-income families can swim 25 metres unaided, compared with 82% from affluent families.

The Bill removes those unfair tax breaks for private schools and reinvests every single penny directly in state schools. That funding will recruit more specialist teachers, provide breakfast clubs in primary schools, and give schools the resources that they need to unlock every child's potential regardless of their family's wealth. This is the politics of equity in action. I will continue to support strong, vibrant high streets, brilliant schools, and a fairer future for all.

**Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Conservative Members do not like to be reminded of the fact that six months ago our Labour Government inherited a £22 billion black hole from their 14 years of

Tory rule—[*Interruption*—as they are demonstrating now. It is, however, a fact. With that inheritance from the Tories, our new Government are taking much-needed action such as that on which we are voting today. In particular, they are taking action to end tax breaks for private schools across the UK, and it is the education side of this Bill on which I will now focus.

Many of us are here today partly because of the inspiration, teaching and support that an incredible teacher gave to us. I want to pay tribute to one of my teachers at Hermitage academy, which is a state school. Mrs McKeirnan was my modern studies teacher, and a fine job she did too. I fondly remember writing essays about the reasons for Labour's election win in 1997; they obviously had an impact. However, while we had skilful and energetic teachers like Mrs McKeirnan, what was less satisfactory was that the school roof often leaked when it rained, and sometimes the windows blew in during the winter. That continued until the election of Labour in both Westminster and Holyrood saw my old school being rebuilt.

We can compare that with the situation today in my constituency, where Balwearie high school in Kirkcaldy needs a new building. The funding has not been available during the last 18 years of SNP government and 14 years of Tory rule. My point is that much of our country's public sector infrastructure is not fit for purpose after years of Tory neglect. To turn that around, we obviously need to raise revenue, and that is exactly what the measures that we are voting on today will do.

Ending tax breaks for private schools is crucial to the record budget settlement for the Scottish Government—the largest settlement since devolution, with an additional £1.5 billion to spend in this financial year and an additional £3.4 billion for next year. For too many in my constituency, the SNP's record of educational failure has let the party down. Nicola Sturgeon once said:

“Judge me on my educational record”,

and she promised that her Government would close the attainment gap by 2026. Last year, the attainment gap in Scotland widened, and the PISA report showed that reading, maths and science are in long-term decline. Now that the SNP Government have the funding, it is up to them to clear up the mess in education that they have created, which fails young people in my constituency.

5 pm

Across the UK, we know that when delivering large-scale investment to our schools to improve standards and increase opportunities, we have to pay for the policies that we want to implement, and it is only right for those with the broadest shoulders to support others around them. As many of my colleagues have said, politics is about choices, and I am proud of the choices that my party is making.

**Victoria Collins** (Harpden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I absolutely agree that we need to make sure that there is equity in education. The hon. Lady says that those with the broadest shoulders will carry the burden, but I have a family in Berkhamsted who worked really hard to put their son into private education. Following the changes, Seb has had to change schools after just two years, because the family cannot afford it any more. I make a plea on behalf of the children affected by this policy, because it should be about lifting all of us up, not bringing anyone down.

**Melanie Ward:** All parents work hard to support their families, and all parents want the very best for their children. Hon. Members would do well to remember that.

The additional £1.8 billion a year, which will be raised by ending tax breaks for private schools, allows us to increase per-pupil funding in real terms and helps to deliver the record budget settlement of an extra £4.9 billion for the Scottish Government. I find it strange that the Conservative party, which in the last Parliament promised to level up the country, should be so opposed to measures that will do exactly that. Indeed, the Leader of the Opposition said that her first act as Prime Minister—I am not sure how many Conservative Members actually believe that the day will ever come—would be to restore tax breaks for private schools. She is obviously not here to defend that statement, but in recent months I have heard little from the Conservatives about what they would cut to pay for that policy. Would they make teachers redundant? Would they cancel breakfast clubs? Would they cut mental health support and careers advice?

At the last election, I was proud to stand on a manifesto that promised to break down the barriers to opportunity. As a state-educated MP, I am also proud to deliver this speech in a Parliament in which 63% of its Members were educated at state comprehensives, with 85% of my party's MPs being state educated. Indeed, only 4% of children in Scotland attend private schools—even fewer than the 7% in England.

The needs of our students are greater than ever. Young people in Scotland face an annual marking saga, decreasing teacher numbers and a deepening mental health crisis—something that I have raised in relation to my own constituency. It is more crucial than ever that we intervene now to prevent those crises from deepening, and that is what these revenue-raising measures will help to fund. I am glad that this Labour Government have introduced protections for SEND children and military families, but it is necessary for private schools to contribute towards improving educational standards across our country. Let us not forget that they have raised their fees by 75% in real terms since 2000.

I know that parents in my Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy constituency want to see their children benefit from the kind of education that their ingenuity, creativity and innate talent deserves. They will be crucial to our future society and economy, and to the kind of country that we want to be. We must make the most of their potential.

In this matter, I take inspiration from Jennie Lee, who attended Beath high school in my constituency and went on to set up the Open University. Her picture hangs in my office. She knew the value of ensuring that high-quality education was available to all, no matter their background and where they lived. If we are to provide that, it has to be paid for, and that is why these measures are so important.

**Mr Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I am grateful for this opportunity to speak in favour of this Bill, having been involved in its scrutiny at most of its stages. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) in thanking all the witnesses who came forward to give evidence to the Bill Committee. I thank them for the evidence they gave and for the useful insight from their respective sectors.

We on the Government Benches are clear that small businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors should pay lower business rates. The Bill establishes two new multipliers that are lower than the current standard business rates multiplier. In order to pay for these changes, we must ask larger businesses to contribute their fair share so that our smaller businesses can thrive. That is because we on this side of the House know that when we have tax cuts, we need to pay for them with revenue-raising measures—something the Opposition have not quite realised yet. This is a good mechanism that the Government are deploying to save our high streets, to incentivise local investment and to support entrepreneurship. As all Members will know, high streets are essential to local towns and should be given the support they need. I am pleased to say that the measures in the Bill will benefit smaller local businesses such as those on Queen Street, which sits in the centre of Leeds South West and Morley.

In Committee, we heard from Paul Gerrard, who is the board secretariat director at the Co-op. He told the Committee that these changes will help 92% of the Co-op's retail properties, but he also estimates that they will help 98% of retail businesses because they will have a rateable value that allows them to benefit from these changes. That has to be welcomed. As for those that will pay more to make these changes possible, the higher multiplier will apply to properties with a value greater than or equal to £500,000, including large warehouses that are often used by online giants. They will pay their fair share, and we can start to level the playing field so that essential community high street businesses are on a level playing field with multinational corporations.

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is a challenge in making sure that things are fair, and we all support a level playing field between the online world and bricks-and-mortar businesses, including in our town centres. There is a thing called the digital services tax, which was conceived while we were in government. Will he say a word about the relative advantages and disadvantages of trying to go after online retailers with business rates changes, which will also affect all manner of other organisations, including bricks-and-mortar retailers, and doing it a different way through a more direct type of tax?

**Mr Searns:** I return to the point I made earlier. We know that we have to support these smaller businesses—these bricks-and-mortar businesses, as the right hon. Gentleman calls them—and the only way we are going to pay for this is by finding the money from elsewhere. We have chosen to cut business rates for smaller businesses, and we are choosing to raise the revenue from the larger businesses and corporations that have been getting away without paying their fair share for far too long.

**Daisy Cooper:** The hon. Member will recognise that it is the Government's intention to reduce business rates for the smallest businesses, but as I have mentioned a couple of times in this debate, House of Commons Library research shows that if we compare this year to two years' time, small businesses will end up 80% worse off, whereas the big chains will end up 40% better off. I believe that this is an unintended consequence. Will he urge the Minister, as I am doing, to address that point in his wind-up?

**Mr Searns:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for that contribution. Of course I have read the House of Commons Library research into this. I also took time to listen to all the witnesses who came forward in the Bill Committee, and they made it clear that the changes in this Bill will benefit small businesses in the long term. I am quite happy with the evidence that they provided to support the changes that the Bill makes.

**Daisy Cooper rose—**

**Mr Searns:** I will move on to the next part of my speech, but I am happy to take any further interventions that might be relevant to that point. I am going to talk about the amendments now.

I think new clauses 1 to 3 are unnecessary. The Government will monitor the effects of the new multipliers and, as we know, they will show what those effects have been in Budget 2025. They will do the same in all future fiscal statements, so the monitoring is already going to take place. The hon. Member refers to the impact these changes might have in two years' time, and the Government will comment on that in all future fiscal statements.

Amendments 1 to 6 are noble, but they would significantly affect and reduce the support that the Bill is able to provide to retail, hospitality and leisure businesses.

**Victoria Collins:** The hon. Gentleman mentions leisure businesses, and I have been contacted by several soft play facilities. They talk about the importance of play to children's wellbeing, but they are not sure whether they will be entitled to the lower rate. Even Parliament's experts are not sure. Will the hon. Gentleman support us in calling on the Government to clarify that soft play will be included in those lower business rates?

**Mr Searns:** Yes, it would be helpful if the Minister could provide clarity. As someone who uses soft play—*[Laughter.]* Not personally, enjoyable though it is. I am sure that my sons Oscar and Arthur, who is six months old and not quite ready to take advantage of soft play, will also be keen to know, so perhaps the Minister could offer some clarity in his closing remarks.

Although amendments 1 to 6 are noble, this Bill is about the high street, and we know just how much our high streets have suffered. This does not mean, for one second, that we are backing down from the challenges facing manufacturing businesses, which amendments 1 to 6 aim to help with. The Budget announced over £3 billion to support the manufacturing sector, including £520 million for a life sciences innovative manufacturing fund, but the changes to business rates in this Bill are primarily about supporting our high streets.

As someone who was teaching on this date a year ago, I am particularly interested in clause 5, which removes the charitable relief enjoyed by some private schools. I welcome this, along with the Budget's broader measures to remove tax breaks from private schools so that we can fund state education properly. A vote for amendment 10 would delay this funding for state schools by another year.

It is estimated that, of the 2,444 private schools in England, only 1,040 will be impacted by the change. The measure will raise around £70 million, which, when taken together with the other revenue-raising measures we have announced, will increase per pupil funding in real terms to benefit the 94% of students who attend



state schools. We must give every child the chance to succeed in life, and that is exactly what this Bill and the other measures we have announced are doing.

**Damian Hinds:** It is worth reflecting that the education budget goes up every year. It does not go up because there has been a change to business rates, VAT or anything else, which is the logic we sometimes hear from Labour Members. If the revenue from those things is slightly smaller than expected, does that mean less money will go into education? Of course not.

We keep hearing about hiring 6,500 more teachers. Does the hon. Gentleman know how many more teachers were hired in the last Parliament?

**Mr Sewards:** I heard the right hon. Gentleman put that question to the Minister in last Monday's Westminster Hall debate but, just to go back to his original point—I will come to the 6,500 new teachers—we are deliberately taking these decisions in order to increase the amount of money that state schools have to teach the 94% of students who enjoy state school education.

As a basic principle, all Members of this House can get behind the idea that it is a basic function of the state to provide a well-funded, excellent state school place for all students, whether or not parents choose to take advantage of it. That is exactly what we are doing with this Bill and the other measures we have announced.

**Dr Luke Evans:** Talking of basic principles, does the hon. Gentleman therefore believe it is right to tax education—yes or no?

5.15 pm

**Mr Sewards:** I believe it is right to tax businesses. Private schools are businesses, and we are choosing to levy the tax on businesses. We are not choosing to levy the tax on state education, because as I was just setting out, it is imperative on us to make sure there is an excellent and well-funded place in state-funded education for all students, should parents choose to take advantage of it. It must be remembered that not all parents have the choice of private or state education. The reason why 94% of students are in state education is because that choice does not exist for most parents in this country. That is why we will take the necessary action to fund state schools properly.

I will make some progress because I can see that Madam Deputy Speaker would like me to—oh, she is being quite generous with her time. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. In which case, I will take more interventions.

Some Members have raised concerns about whether the legislation adversely affects the private schools that are primarily concerned with teaching students with EHCPs. I am pleased to report that it does not. The Government have clearly set out that private schools that teach 50% or more students with EHCPs will continue to be exempt from business rates, which is exactly the right approach. There are therefore no concerns there.

Amendment 8 seeks exemptions for certain kinds of schools. We have talked a little bit about faith schools, and we talked about that a lot on Second Reading. I cannot support the amendment given that we are ending the tax breaks to support the 94% of students who attend state schools. If we dilute the measures in the Bill for that exception, it is easy to make an argument for

the next exemption, the one after that and the one after that as well. Our guiding principle should be that every child is entitled to an excellent, properly funded state school place, as I think I have said repeatedly.

Amendment 9—the last one I will speak about—gives local authorities discretion over whether the higher multiplier will apply. As many hon. Members will know, local authorities already possess wide-reaching powers regarding discretionary rate relief. Given that the Bill does not affect those powers at all, I do not think the amendment is required.

To conclude, the measures in the Bill are vital to bring about the restoration of our high streets, support local businesses and give state schools the funding they desperately need. Those are the priorities of this Labour Government and my priorities too. If Conservative Members claim to represent the party of business again, if they ever hope to seize back the mantle of being the party of opportunity, I hope they put their money where their mouth is and join us in voting for this unamended Bill today.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I thought it very sensible for the hon. Member to clarify that it is young Arthur, not himself, who enjoys soft play. I call the final speaker, Chris Vince.

**Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op):** As I have about two hours to give this speech, I want to start by going back to the summer of 1983—[*Laughter.*] I have just told everyone how old I am, have I not?

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate. I also thank the Minister for all his work on the Bill. I genuinely want to thank all Members from across the House too for their contributions in Committee. I thought the way in which the Bill was discussed in Committee and the contributions from both sides were well thought out and, as I have mentioned before, respectful—I say that in advance of any interventions. I also want to thank all the people who came forward to provide evidence to the Committee.

I am honoured to rise to speak on Report on behalf of my constituency of Harlow. First—I promise I will not take two hours—I think everybody in the Chamber will forgive me for taking the opportunity to thank and praise the hard-working teachers and school support staff across my constituency for the hard work they do day in, day out to support young people.

I had a wonderful opportunity to visit Mark Hall academy in my constituency last week and saw the incredible work that its staff are doing to provide an inclusive atmosphere. I particularly welcomed the fact that the school was about not just exam results, but what I describe as the hidden curriculum—how young people grow and develop. The school also focuses on the importance of debating skills, which may be of particular interest to the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds)—I am only joking. I thought that perhaps he and I could go together and learn a thing or two. [*Interruption.*] I set myself up for that. The school also recognises the importance of critical thinking. As I say, it was a fantastic visit, which was capped by an opportunity to meet the young carers in the school. As many Members will know, young carers are a hugely important issue for me.

I will briefly address private schools, as they have been mentioned a number of times. As I said on Second Reading, private schools affected by this policy can choose to absorb some of the cost if they so wish, and that is their prerogative. Members across the House may disagree with this, but, ultimately, the fundamental issue here is fairness and equality.

**Sarah Bool:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Chris Vince:** Yes, I certainly have the time.

**Sarah Bool:** The hon. Gentleman mentioned that private schools could absorb the cost. The headteacher of my Carrdus school told me that they could not absorb the cost. The school has tried everything possible to stay open, but it cannot. One just cannot make this claim that these schools can absorb the cost; they cannot.

**Chris Vince:** I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. Having spoken to headteachers in private schools, I know that that is what some of them are looking to do. I recognise that may not be the case in that situation. As I said on Second Reading, ultimately, we want all schools to be at such a standard that parents do not need to choose to send their children to private school.

Every business in the UK is required to pay VAT. The “Cambridge Dictionary” definition of a business is a particular company that buys and sells goods and services. Parents pay for the service of their children’s teachers, and they pay for their children to go to private school.

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman think that universities are companies? If he does, would he advocate imposing VAT on fees for university education?

**Chris Vince:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, but I think that we have had a very good debate on higher education today. It is interesting that Conservative Members want to talk about university and higher education when it is in an awful state. Clearly, we need to look at how private schools are funded. *[Interruption.]* I am being a teacher, sorry. Members can carry on rambling; this is not a school.

The second part of my speech is about our high streets. I think we can all agree about the importance of supporting our high streets, while also recognising the changing nature of both retail and those high streets. The Bill is designed to decrease tax on high street businesses and make online retailers pay their fair share. Very briefly, in its evidence, the Co-op said that the Bill would benefit “92% of our estate”, which is 98% of retail stores, and described it as having “a significant impact”. The representative of the Association Of Convenience Stores described the Bill as very helpful, and

“very positive for the sector, but...also very positive for the places where they trade.”—*[Official Report, Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Public Bill Committee, 11 December 2024; c. 18, Q25.]*

I have not taken two hours, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will conclude. I welcome the Bill. I welcome the practical steps that this Labour Government are taking to address the issues left by the previous Government and to support small businesses in my constituency of Harlow and across the country.

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

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It appears that the attraction of business rates has not been sufficient to draw as many speakers to the Chamber as some debates, but I am none the less grateful to all Members for their contributions to today’s debate.

Just a few months ago, we exposed a £2.4 billion black hole in the local government budget: £3.7 billion of additional spending was announced, with only £1.3 billion of funding to pay for it. Over the weeks since the Budget, we have seen pensioners, businesses of all sizes and types, schools, landlords and tenants all facing additional costs to begin to backfill the consequences of those political choices. With the Bill before the House tonight, those tax hikes are heading for the business rates bill of companies and organisations, large and small, on high streets the length and breadth of the country.

We should not pretend that this is an essential step. Our councils are acknowledged as the most efficient part of the public sector. They responded magnificently to the consequences of the financial crash in the late 2000s, with rising resident satisfaction against a backdrop of increasingly challenged budgets, but the decisions made by this new Government, in particular loading an additional £1.66 billion of national insurance costs on to local authorities, with less than a third of that covered by the promised additional funding, has consequences in our town halls. The Bill begins to make a small step towards bridging that colossal gap, but the Government need to own these political choices. The consequences of the Bill for our businesses and schools are stark.

First, let me address the changes in the multiplier, and in particular the consequences for larger premises. Under the changes to the business rate system introduced by the Government overall, increased costs loaded on to larger premises will provide the source for any reductions for smaller businesses, unlike under the previous Government, when it was covered from general grants. As a result, these businesses, often small and medium-sized enterprises—important employers and vital sources of growth for our economy—will face higher bills.

Such businesses have been characterised by the Government as warehouses, often owned by online giants, but when we look at the detail from the Government’s own data, we see firms such as Banner, which supplies the offices of Members of Parliament with all kinds of stationery products, Tygavac Advanced Materials Ltd, and Zetex Semiconductors plc, which is an American-owned business that trades on the London stock exchange, producing products that are vital for our security and growth. Those are just examples of businesses in the Minister’s own constituency that will be hit by the changes. Scapa Group Ltd, a major healthcare provider in the constituency of the Secretary of State, will also face significantly higher bills.

We have heard Members wax lyrical about how much they value the opportunities for growth in this country, and how they value in particular different types of community assets, but 28 of the data centres that the Prime Minister speaks of as being vital to the AI agenda will be hit by the Bill, and 16 of the breweries that have supposedly benefited from a penny off the pint, including

Fuller's, Bulmers, John Smith's and Greene King, all face significant increases in their bills. Eight zoos and safari parks, including Colchester, Bristol and Chester zoos, face significantly increased business rates bills, and 48 stadiums across the country, including Wimbledon, Twickenham and both the Manchester stadiums, all expect to see big rises as a consequence. All Labour Members who love to champion their local pub and talk about taking a penny off the pint need to remember that the consequence of the Bill is to put business rates up by, on average, £5,500 a year per pub. The list is available from Government data. It is very clear that this will be a difficult Bill for retail, hospitality and leisure to swallow, after a period of direct and specific support from the previous Government.

This change does not come from a Government that came to office saying that this was their intention or plan; it comes from a Government whose Chancellor—Rachel from accounts—went so far as to promise in 2021 that she would abolish business rates. Business owners and workers who thought they were voting for a Labour Government that would come in and abolish business rates are facing significant increases today.

5.30 pm

There is still no certainty on the small business rate relief, which many of the witnesses in Committee and many of those who have been in touch with all of us as Members of Parliament highlighted as being incredibly important for smaller businesses and high streets.

The Bill comes against a backdrop of serious concerns expressed across the retail sector and licensed trade—the Association of Convenience Stores' comment on the Bill was lukewarm to say the least—and some of the biggest retailers, such as Sainsbury's, about the damage the Budget in general and the Bill in particular do to employment and pay. When my party reflects on the things we are proud of that we did in government, what stands out for me is that 4 million more people were in work in this country than when we took office and youth unemployment was halved in our time in office. The Bill puts the financial wellbeing of the families included in those statistics at risk.

The Bill not only has an impact on businesses; it carries out this Government's spiteful and politically motivated attack on education in the private sector. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) said, it is not the case that private schools are all luxury businesses; many face significant challenges. It is worth going through some of those challenges in a bit of detail to understand why the amendments are important and why many of the things that have been said about the consequences of the Bill are simply incorrect.

First, in the context of school financing, we should recognise that the measures in the Bill and the introduction of VAT will not end up benefiting our state schools. If every single penny of all those extra taxes were to find its way into state school budgets, it would represent the cost of half the salary of a single classroom teacher. The effect of the national insurance increases alone on school budgets wipe that out straightaway. State schools unambiguously will be worse off as a result of the measures set out in the Budget.

**Dr Luke Evans:** We have heard categorically from Labour that private schools are businesses. They see themselves as part of the community and as charities.

Now that they are seen as businesses, they will act as businesses and will have to look to raise revenue from all their sports facilities and anything else that they willingly gave away to the state system. Private schools work with the state system and ensure that there is support for the state system—that is the community basis of what schooling is about. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that defining them as businesses will be a big problem?

**David Simmonds:** My hon. Friend highlights a point that many of us will have heard from our local state schools: the fact that they are in sharing arrangements with private schools to access facilities. They are concerned that, as the cost drivers introduced by the Government and the Budget increase the pressure on those schools, they may lose the free or low-cost access they have.

**Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con):** I had a meeting with a state school in my constituency that said the changes will be damaging because it gets a grant from a private school, which will have to be cut to deal with the impact of VAT. That state school, which is in a genuinely working-class community, will be £200,000 a year worse off under this policy. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is terrible?

**David Simmonds:** I agree that it is terrible, but sadly it is typical of the consequences introduced into the system by the actions of the Government.

**Melanie Ward:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree that state schools should not have to go with a begging bowl to private schools to ask to borrow their facilities? They should be properly funded in their own right.

**David Simmonds:** Having served as a governor in three different state schools during my local government career, I know that many state schools have facilities that they are very happy to share—some have swimming pools, some have libraries, some have adult education facilities. The sharing of facilities among schools of all kinds is normal, but the Bill introduces additional pressure that will take away access to those facilities. Isolated communities in particular, which benefit most from that access, risk losing it.

The basic fact that schools will end up net worse off demonstrates that, contrary to what has been said, this policy fails the basic test of equity and efficiency. It harms some people in our country, with no corresponding benefit to anybody else. Let me address the argument proposed by a number of Members that the consequences are marginal. We heard a lot of evidence from different people. The hon. Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) referred to an academic who has built a career writing tracts attacking the private education sector. That is not somebody I consider to be an expert. I will take the word of mums and dads, the Independent Schools Council, institutions that represent people across our country and the House of Commons Library over the word of a single left-wing academic.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) said, "It's not fair because schools in the state sector pay business rates." She may not be aware that there is already an 80% mandatory business rate relief for voluntary aided, foundation and academy



schools, and 100% of all state school business rates liability is paid for by central Government anyway, so no school budget is burdened by the cost of business rates, whereas the consequence of the Bill will be that every independent school is burdened by those costs.

Many of us in this Chamber will see the added value that independent education brings. Many of those experts whose opinion we value have spoken profoundly about the fact that so much of our special educational needs provision is in the private sector. I made reference in Committee to Geshur school in my constituency. I defy any Labour Member visiting Geshur to come away saying, “That is a private business that deserves to be taxed.” Such institutions have emerged—in many cases over a long time—to cater to very specific and profound special educational needs and disabilities, and they are looking aghast at the consequences of the Bill.

There are a number of reasons for that, some of which are technical. The Government’s solution is to introduce the “wholly or mainly” provision. Schools that wholly or mainly provide places for children with an education, health and care plan—by which the Government mean 50% or more—will be exempt from the provisions. The problem with that policy is that many children who have well-established, diagnosed special educational needs and disabilities do not have an education, health and care plan.

Indeed, beneath statementing, which was the term at the time, the previous Labour Government introduced a number of tiers: school action and school action plus. Children with moderate to severe special educational needs and disabilities could fall into those categories and be supported in a mainstream setting. The statementing and education, health and care plan process was only ever intended to make provision for children with the most significant and severe needs. That is already the case across the state sector. We know from the evidence of many parents up and down the land that they found provision in local independent schools, and at their own cost, for children who had not qualified or had not yet achieved an education, health and care plan. It is very clear that the Government’s solution underestimates, and falls well short of accounting for, the number of children with special educational needs and disabilities. This is a Government whose Secretary of State for Education stood at the Dispatch Box last week and talked about how much they believe in inclusion. Well, their actions in support of this Bill say otherwise.

The Bill also fails to address the needs of parents who wish to secure a place for their child at a school that has a special character. This is particularly important in rural areas, but it is an issue across the country. We all know that there are schools that have the ability to provide specialist training or coaching in a sport that a child excels in and wishes to pursue, and there are schools that have a faith or cultural identity that is incredibly important to the family.

By requiring all those types of school to pay these significantly hiked taxes, this Government are bearing down on choice in the education sector and pushing up costs for mums and dads. These are not wealthy families, but ordinary people in this country who are seeking to do the best for their child and who, in some cases, are willing to take on the responsibility of paying for their child’s education even if they could still pursue the opportunity of an education, health and care plan for

them through the state system. They choose to do the right thing by their child, and this Government will be penalising them.

The amendments we have tabled seek to address the shortcomings I have described as best we can. We will also support some of the amendments tabled by other parties where they clearly fulfil our shared objectives, but as the speeches and other contributions to this debate by Conservative Members have shown, there could have been so many more amendments seeking to get this Bill right.

In conclusion, all of the hereditaments that are covered by this Bill are important to our economy and to growth, and in many cases they are vital to our communities. Since the Chancellor’s Budget, growth has flatlined, inflation has revived, borrowing costs are rising and employment opportunities are diminishing. It is not too late for this Government to choose a different path, and we invite them to do so this afternoon.

### **The Minister for Local Government and English**

**Devolution (Jim McMahon):** Before I speak to the amendments tabled by the hon. Members for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade), for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) and for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), I thank Members from across the Chamber for their contributions and for the constructive spirit, by and large, in which they have engaged with the Bill since its introduction. Although they are not always seen, with evidence sessions and Committee stages not always being prime-time TV viewing—it is a curse, but that is the way it is—those deliberations are nevertheless essential. The contributions that were made by Members from all parts of the House in probing and scrutinising the Bill were valuable, and I hope that all Members found them interesting.

I will begin by speaking to the amendments concerning the impact of the new multipliers. New clause 1, tabled by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole, would require the Secretary of State to review the impact of clauses 1 to 4 on businesses, high streets and economic growth within six months of those clauses coming into effect. The hon. Members for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner and for St Albans have proposed two other new clauses. New clauses 2 and 3 would seek to impose in legislation a requirement for an analysis of the impact of the new business rate multipliers at varying points ahead of, or following, implementation of the Bill. New clause 3 also seeks to require an assessment of how the application of the new multipliers would differ between retail, hospitality and leisure businesses occupying different numbers of properties, and to compare that assessment with the impact of retail, hospitality and leisure relief from the 2020-21 financial year to the 2025-26 financial year.

We agree in principle with the points that hon. Members have raised through their new clauses. It is right that the Government consider the effects of their policies on businesses, on the high street and on economic growth, and indeed within different sectors. It is the policy of the Government that those businesses should feel a material benefit as a direct result of these measures, so let me set out how we propose to do that.

It states in the Bill that the two new retail, hospitality and leisure multipliers may not be set at more than 20p in the pound lower than the small business multiplier.

The Bill also places appropriate restrictions on the higher multiplier: when it is set, it cannot be more than 10p in the pound above the standard multiplier, and cannot be applied to properties with a rateable value of less than £500,000. It is important to state that those are not the intended tax rates, but the maximum parameters to be introduced through the new business rate multipliers. As we explained during the Bill's passage through the House, the actual tax rates will be set at the 2025 Budget, taking into account the effects of the 2026 business rate revaluation, as well as the broader economic and fiscal context at that time.

**Daisy Cooper:** The Minister has been here throughout the debate, and he will have heard a number of my interventions. I accept his point that those figures will not be published until Budget 2025. May I ask if he is in a position to give a cast-iron guarantee that small independents, with a small number of hereditaments, will not be subsidising organisations that have many, such as the big chains?

5.45 pm

**Jim McMahon:** I did hear the hon. Lady, and I think we all accept the principle of needing to target or get support to those important small businesses, which we can all identify in our constituencies. With respect, I think there was a degree of conflation with the temporary reliefs brought in during covid, which the previous Government did not account for, that were always going to come to an end.

Our challenge was how to reconcile ongoing support for the high street with a permanent relief in law so that businesses know exactly where they are and can plan ahead with certainty. The choice we made was far fairer: to target higher-value properties of more than £500,000, which are generally—but, I accept, not entirely—the large-footprint warehouse and distribution premises used by the big online retailers.

The shadow Minister used the example of the stationery provider in my constituency. It is an online retailer, so it ought to be paying more. Why? Because for a long time—and we have all heard this from our constituents and industry—we have needed a rebalancing from online to on-street and from out-of-town to in-town, and that is exactly what this targeting does. It was never intended to be a continuation of the relief that was only temporary during covid. It is about rebuilding the foundations, and that is exactly what we have set out to do.

**Daisy Cooper:** I completely accept that point, and I am very sympathetic to the fact that the Minister inherited a sticking-plaster system from the previous Government. If during the course of this year his Government's own analysis proves what I have discovered from the House of Commons Library research, will he ensure that the Government at least do not rule out introducing a new small business relief in a targeted way to support such small independent businesses?

**Jim McMahon:** As with all tax policies, we will keep this under review, and I say that in a very general sense. We absolutely believe that the businesses that are the backbone of our high streets, town centres and communities would, were it not for these measures, go bust. They would not be viable and they would feel the heat very quickly.

However, because of the measures we are taking, businesses will be able to plan with certainty for the future, knowing that they have a Government acting in partnership with them in that enterprise.

**David Simmonds:** I appreciate the Minister's point, but clearly no Parliament binds its successors, so every Parliament must make its own decisions. A lot of Members have asked about small business rate relief. It would be helpful to have some certainty from the Dispatch Box about the Government's intentions on that. Can he give us that certainty tonight?

**Jim McMahon:** I can certainly give the certainty that we are providing in law for a permanent relief for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, and we will fund that through a very targeted additional payment for properties of more than £500,000, which will primarily be the online retailers occupying big warehouses and distribution centres. It is a promise to shift from the online to the on-street, as I talked about.

Before we move on to vote on the amendment, I will make some progress. The House will know that tax policy and legislation are not subject to the same requirement for the impact assessments that accompany non-fiscal policy decisions. Nevertheless, the Treasury is committed to publishing an analysis of the effects of any multipliers at Budget 2025, which we hope will go some way to reassuring hon. Members that we will be considering the impacts of this policy carefully before the new rates are set.

The Government will continue to keep the policy and its effects under review as a matter of course, because we believe it is good practice to do that for all taxes. However, we want to make it clear to hon. Members that the Government have heard them, and we understand the importance of robustly understanding tax changes, which is something to which we have already committed. I hope this commitment to understanding the effects of the new tax rate when it is introduced will enable hon. Members not to press their proposed new clauses.

Amendment 9 would give local authorities discretion over whether the higher multipliers enabled by the Bill should be applied. The Bill would enable the Treasury, through regulations, to introduce permanently lower multipliers for qualifying retail, hospitality and leisure properties, and to fund this by introducing higher multipliers for properties with a rateable value of £500,000 or more. As we explained in Committee, we do not have any plans to narrow the scope of the higher multipliers as doing so would reduce the funding available for the very targeted support for lower multipliers for uses that everyone in the Chamber supports.

That does not mean that local authorities will be unable to apply local discretion to rate bills. As was set out in contributions, local authorities already have wide-ranging powers for discretionary rate relief as set out in section 47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 where the authority is satisfied that that would be reasonable, having regard to the interests of council tax payers. We assure the House that those discretionary powers are unaffected by the Bill and remain in place. Given that local authorities will be able to use those discretionary powers to provide relief, including for ratepayers subject to the higher multiplier, the amendment is not required. I hope that assures hon. Members.

I turn to amendments 1 to 6, which would widen the scope of the lower multipliers so that qualifying manufacturing properties would become eligible alongside retail, hospitality and leisure properties. In the Bill Committee, the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) spoke of the vital importance of manufacturing to the British economy and of how providing them with a permanent cut to their business rates could help them to recover.

Let me reiterate the Government's support for the manufacturing sector as a whole. It is said that Britain is a nation of shopkeepers, but it is also a nation of innovators, creators and entrepreneurs. Our manufacturing sector helps bring many of those ideas to life, and we understand its importance. But the Government must also support our high streets—the hoteliers, restaurateurs and publicans—and that is especially important with a property tax such as business rates as those sectors rely on good locations, which in the business rates system are often valuable locations. If they did not have that targeted support, they would feel the hit very strongly.

Through the Bill, we are delivering our manifesto pledge to protect valuable town centres and high streets by enabling the introduction of permanently lower taxes for qualifying retail, hospitality and leisure properties from 2026-27, ending the uncertainty of the annual retail, hospitality and leisure relief that has been rolled over year on year since the covid-19 pandemic. We have been clear throughout the process that this tax cut must be fully funded. Therefore, against the current fiscal backdrop, a widening of the scope of properties eligible for the lower multipliers might dilute the support that the Government were able to provide, or its impact might even require a higher tax rate for properties with values of more than £500,000 to fund such new multipliers. However, we respect hon. Members' points of view and agree that our manufacturing sector should be recognised and supported.

Advanced manufacturing is one of the eight growth-driving sectors identified as part of the Government's industrial strategy. At the autumn Budget, the Government announced £975 million for the aerospace sector over five years, over £2 billion for the automotive sector over the same period, and £520 million for the new life sciences innovative manufacturing fund. That is how the Government intend to support the innovators, creators and entrepreneurs mentioned earlier. Because we have this package in place to support manufacturing, we cannot accept the amendments, but I hope that I have been able to provide hon. Members with reassurance as to our commitment to support the sector, which I am sure the whole House recognises is vital.

I turn to amendments 7 and 8. While clause 5 will remove business rates charitable relief from private schools, the amendments would introduce new provisions or expand existing provisions in the Bill to ensure that certain private schools remain eligible for business rates charitable relief. Amendment 7 would result in a fee-paying school retaining its relief if it wholly or mainly catered for pupils with special educational needs as defined under section 20 of the Children and Families Act 2014, whether or not those pupils have an education, health and care plan. Amendment 8 would result in a private faith school or a private school with a special character maintaining its eligibility for charitable relief if there were no maintained or academy school of the same faith or special character

within the statutory walking distance set out in the Education Act 1996. Although amendment 8 does not indicate what may constitute a special character, we understand from previous contributions in the House that that would include schools that follow a particular method of education. Amending the basis on which fee-paying schools are eligible to retain their charitable rates relief in the manner in which the amendment proposes would undermine the Government's intention to remove tax breaks for private schools. As we have said, the removal of the tax break is necessary to fund school support for the over 90% of pupils who are educated in the state sector.

The Government have carefully considered their approach to minimising the impact on pupils with the most acute needs. The Bill provides that private schools that are charities and that wholly or mainly—by over 50%—provide education for pupils with an education, health and care plan will remain eligible for charitable relief. As hon. Members will be aware, most children with special educational needs, with or without an EHCP, have their needs met in mainstream state-funded schools. If an EHCP assessment concludes that a child can only be supported in a private school, the local authority directly funds that place.

Where an EHCP has not named a private school, the parents or carers of the child may choose to place that child in a private school, but that is a choice made by the parents and does not detract from the assessment that the pupil's needs can be catered for in the mainstream state-funded sector. In instances where a child's parents disagree with the local authority's assessment that their needs can be met in the state sector, the EHCP system is the most appropriate channel to resolve such disagreements.

The Government are aware of the concerns raised by hon. Members and others that pupils with special educational needs in private schools may lose their charitable relief. The Government believe that most private special schools will not be affected at all by the Bill. In fact, we expect any private special schools losing eligibility for private relief to be the exception; according to our assessment, they could be in the single figures. It is important that we keep it in that context.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Will the Minister give way?

**Jim McMahon:** I do not have time for any more interventions.

Private schools that benefit from the existing rates exemption for properties that are wholly used for the training or welfare of disabled people will continue to do so. The majority of children in England with special educational needs, with or without an EHCP, have their needs met in the state sector already. The Government's ambition is for all children and young people with special educational needs or a disability to receive the right support to succeed in their education as they move into adult life.

As Members know, all schools are required to follow the Equality Act 2010, which includes fostering and promoting an environment that encourages respect and tolerance of children and families of all faiths and of none. We have listened carefully to arguments relating to exempting faith schools from the Bill, and we have decided that a carve-out for faith schools or schools with other special characteristics cannot be justified. For those reasons, we are unable to accept amendment 8.



Finally, amendment 10 would delay the removal of charitable rates relief from private schools by one year to April 2026. To eliminate barriers to opportunity, we need to concentrate on the broader picture of the state sector, where most children are educated. Ending the tax breaks on VAT and business rates for private schools is a tough but, in the end, necessary decision that will secure additional funding to help deliver on the Government's commitments to education and young people. Together, these policies are expected to raise over £1.8 billion a year by 2029-30—essential funding to improve the education of the vast majority of school-age children. Delaying their implementation would forgo about £140 million, which, frankly, cannot be justified.

The House has heard a good range of amendments to the Bill, and I hope that I have been able to address them all. Although we are not able to accept the amendments, I hope that the assurances that I have outlined are accepted and Members feel able to withdraw them. If not, the Government cannot support them.

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

*The House divided: Ayes 175, Noes 342.*

### Division No. 83]

[5.58 pm

#### AYES

Adam, Shockat	Davey, rh Ed
Amos, Gideon	Davies, Gareth
Anderson, Lee	Davies, Mims
Anderson, Stuart ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i> )	Davis, rh David
Andrew, rh Stuart	Dean, Bobby
Aquarone, Steff	Denyer, Carla
Argar, rh Edward	Dewhurst, Charlie
Babarinde, Josh	Dillon, Mr Lee
Bacon, Gareth	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Barclay, rh Steve	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Bedford, Mr Peter	Evans, Dr Luke
Bennett, Alison	Farage, Nigel
Bhatti, Saqib	Farron, Tim
Blackman, Bob	Forster, Mr Will
Bool, Sarah	Fortune, Peter
Bowie, Andrew	Fox, Sir Ashley
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Franklin, Zöe
Braverman, rh Suella	Freeman, George
Brewer, Alex	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Garnier, Mark
Burghart, Alex	George, Andrew
Cane, Charlotte	Glen, rh John
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Goldman, Marie
Cartlidge, James	Gordon, Tom
Chadwick, David	Grant, Helen
Chamberlain, Wendy	Green, Sarah
Chambers, Dr Danny	Griffith, Andrew
Chope, Sir Christopher	Griffiths, Alison
Chowns, Ellie	Harding, Monica
Cleverly, rh Mr James	Harris, Rebecca
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hayes, rh Sir John
Cocking, Lewis	Heylings, Pippa
Coghlan, Chris	Hinds, rh Damian
Collins, Victoria	Hoare, Simon
Cooper, Daisy	Hobhouse, Wera
Cooper, John	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Costa, Alberto	Hollinrake, Kevin
Coutinho, rh Claire ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i> )	Holmes, Paul
Cross, Harriet	Hudson, Dr Neil
Dance, Adam	Hunt, rh Jeremy
Darling, Steve	Jardine, Christine
	Jarvis, Liz
	Jenkin, Sir Bernard

Jones, Clive	Ramsay, Adrian
Kearns, Alicia ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i> )	Rankin, Jack
Khan, Ayoub	Reed, David
Kohler, Mr Paul	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Kruger, Danny	Robertson, Joe
Lam, Katie	Rosindell, Andrew
Lamont, John	Sabine, Anna
Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Savage, Dr Roz
Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Shannon, Jim
Lopez, Julia	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
MacCleary, James	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
MacDonald, Mr Angus	Simmonds, David
Maguire, Ben	Slade, Vikki
Maguire, Helen	Smart, Lisa
Mak, Alan	Smith, Greg
Malthouse, rh Kit	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Martin, Mike	Smith, Rebecca
Mathew, Brian	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Mayhew, Jerome	Sollom, Ian
Maynard, Charlie	Spencer, Dr Ben
McMurdock, James	Spencer, Patrick
McVey, rh Esther	Stafford, Gregory
van Mierlo, Freddie	Stephenson, Blake
Miller, Calum	Stride, rh Mel
Milne, John	Stuart, rh Graham
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Mohamed, Iqbal	Taylor, Luke
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Thomas, Bradley
Moore, Robbie	Thomas, Cameron
Moran, Layla	Tice, Richard
Morgan, Helen	Timothy, Nick
Morrison, Mr Tom ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster</i> )	Trott, rh Laura
Morrissey, Joy	Vickers, Matt
Morton, rh Wendy	Voaden, Caroline
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Whately, Helen
Mundell, rh David	Wild, James
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Wilkinson, Max
Norman, rh Jesse	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Wilson, Munira
O'Brien, Neil	Wood, Mike
Olney, Sarah	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Paul, Rebecca	Wrigley, Martin
Perteghella, Manuela	Young, Claire
Philp, rh Chris	
Pinkerton, Dr Al	
Pritchard, rh Mark	

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Jamie Stone and**  
**Susan Murray**

#### NOES

Abbott, Jack	Bailey, Olivia
Abrahams, Debbie	Baines, David
Akehurst, Luke	Baker, Richard
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Bance, Antonia
Aldridge, Dan	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
Amesbury, Mike ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i> )	Begum, Apsana
Anderson, Callum	Bell, Torsten
Anderson, Fleur	Benn, rh Hilary
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Betts, Mr Clive
Arthur, Dr Scott	Billington, Ms Polly
Asato, Jess	Bishop, Matt
Asser, James	Blake, Olivia
Athwal, Jas	Blake, Rachel
Atkinson, Catherine	Bloore, Chris
Atkinson, Lewis	Blundell, Mrs Elsie ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i> )

Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burke, Maureen  
 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  
 Carling, Sam  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Charters, Mr Luke  
 Clark, Feryal  
 Coleman, Ben  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy  
 Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creagh, Mary  
 Creasy, Ms Stella  
 Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris  
 Daby, Janet  
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Darlington, Emily  
 Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 Dean, Josh  
 Dearden, Kate  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dixon, Anna  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Downie, Graeme  
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Eastwood, Colum  
 Eccles, Cat  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Efford, Clive  
 Egan, Damien  
 Ellis, Maya  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Entwistle, Kirith  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Ferguson, Mark  
 Ferguson, Patricia

Fleet, Natalie  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gardner, Dr Allison  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 German, Gill  
 Gilbert, Tracy  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gittins, Becky  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Goldsborough, Ben  
 Grady, John  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Haigh, rh Louise  
 Hall, Sarah  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hatton, Lloyd  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire  
 Hume, Alison  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Ingham, Leigh  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Jogee, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Jones, rh Darren  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Louise  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Josan, Gurinder Singh  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kane, Chris  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast  
by Chris Elmore*)  
 Kendall, rh Liz  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lamb, Peter  
 Law, Noah  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive

Lightwood, Simon  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 Macdonald, Alice  
 MacNae, Andy  
 Madders, Justin  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Martin, Amanda  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mather, Keir  
 Mayer, Alex  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McNeill, Kirsty  
 Midgley, Anneliese  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Moon, Perran  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe  
 Mullane, Margaret  
 Murphy, Luke  
 Murray, Chris  
 Murray, James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Myer, Luke  
 Naish, James  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 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  
 Phillipson, rh Bridget  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Race, Steve  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Reader, Mike

Reed, rh Steve  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Richards, Jake  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Mrs Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sackman, Sarah  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Sowards, Mr Mark  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Sullivan, Kirsteen  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, David  
 Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote  
cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turley, Anna  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Karl  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Walker, Imogen  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris

Welsh, Michelle  
West, Catherine  
Western, Andrew  
Western, Matt  
Wheeler, Michael  
White, Jo  
White, Katie  
Williams, David  
Witherden, Steve

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

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
Gerald Jones and  
Anna McMorrin

*Question accordingly negated.*

6.12 pm

*Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, 25 November).*

*The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).*

### New Clause 2

#### REVIEW OF IMPACT OF NEW MULTIPLIERS

“(1) Within eighteen months of the day on which sections 1 to 4 of this Act are commenced, the Secretary of State must conduct a review of the impact of those sections.

(2) The review must consider—

- (a) the impact of the introduction of the lower multiplier on qualifying retail, hospitality and leisure hereditaments,
- (b) the impact of the introduction of higher multipliers in relation to a hereditament for which the value is £500,000 or more.

(3) The Secretary of State must, as soon as is reasonably practicable, publish the review and lay a copy of that review before Parliament.

(4) As part of the review the Secretary of State must consult with such parties as they see fit including—

- (a) businesses,
- (b) the Valuation Office Agency; and
- (c) Billing Authorities.”—(*David Simmonds.*)

*This new clause would require the Secretary of State, within 18 months of sections 1 to 4 of the Act being commenced, to review and consult on the impact of new multipliers.*

*Brought up.*

*Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.*

*The House divided: Ayes 174, Noes 340.*

**Division No. 84]**

**[6.13 pm**

#### AYES

Adam, Shockat  
Amos, Gideon  
Anderson, Lee  
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Andrew, rh Stuart  
Aquarone, Steff  
Argar, rh Edward  
Babarinde, Josh  
Bacon, Gareth  
Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
Barclay, rh Steve  
Bennett, Alison  
Bhatti, Saqib  
Blackman, Bob  
Bool, Sarah  
Bowie, Andrew  
Bradley, rh Dame Karen  
Braverman, rh Suella

Brewer, Alex  
Brown-Fuller, Jess  
Burghart, Alex  
Cane, Charlotte  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Cartlidge, James  
Chadwick, David  
Chamberlain, Wendy  
Chambers, Dr Danny  
Chope, Sir Christopher  
Cleverly, rh Mr James  
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
Cocking, Lewis  
Coghlan, Chris  
Collins, Victoria  
Cooper, Daisy  
Cooper, John  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Costa, Alberto

Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
Cross, Harriet  
Dance, Adam  
Darling, Steve  
Davey, rh Ed  
Davies, Gareth  
Davies, Mims  
Dean, Bobby  
Dewhurst, Charlie  
Dillon, Mr Lee  
Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
Evans, Dr Luke  
Favage, Nigel  
Farron, Tim  
Forster, Mr Will  
Fortune, Peter  
Fox, Sir Ashley  
Francois, rh Mr Mark  
Franklin, Zöe  
Freeman, George  
Gale, rh Sir Roger  
Garnier, Mark  
George, Andrew  
Glen, rh John  
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  
Hollinrake, Kevin  
Holmes, Paul  
Hudson, Dr Neil  
Hunt, rh Jeremy  
Hussain, Mr Adnan  
Jardine, Christine  
Jarvis, Liz  
Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
Johnson, Dr Caroline  
Jones, Clive  
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
Khan, Ayoub  
Kohler, Mr Paul  
Kruger, Danny  
Lam, Katie  
Lamont, John  
Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
Lopez, Julia  
MacCleary, James  
MacDonald, Mr Angus  
Maguire, Ben  
Maguire, Helen  
Mak, Alan  
Malthouse, rh Kit  
Martin, Mike  
Mathew, Brian  
Mayhew, Jerome  
Maynard, Charlie  
McMurdoch, James  
McVey, rh Esther

van Mierlo, Freddie  
Miller, Calum  
Milne, John  
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
Mohamed, Iqbal  
Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
Moore, Robbie  
Moran, Layla  
Morgan, Helen  
Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)  
Morrissey, Joy  
Morton, rh Wendy  
Mullan, Dr Kieran  
Mundell, rh David  
Murray, Susan  
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
Norman, rh Jesse  
Obese-Jecty, Ben  
O'Brien, Neil  
Olney, Sarah  
Paul, Rebecca  
Perteghella, Manuela  
Philp, rh Chris  
Pinkerton, Dr Al  
Pritchard, rh Mark  
Rankin, Jack  
Reed, David  
Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
Robertson, Joe  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Sabine, Anna  
Savage, Dr Roz  
Shannon, Jim  
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil  
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
Simmonds, David  
Slade, Vikki  
Smart, Lisa  
Smith, Greg  
Smith, rh Sir Julian  
Snowden, Mr Andrew  
Sollom, Ian  
Spencer, Dr Ben  
Spencer, Patrick  
Stafford, Gregory  
Stephenson, Blake  
Stone, Jamie  
Stride, rh Mel  
Stuart, rh Graham  
Taylor, Luke  
Thomas, Bradley  
Thomas, Cameron  
Tice, Richard  
Timothy, Nick  
Trott, rh Laura  
Vickers, Matt  
Voaden, Caroline  
Whately, Helen  
Wild, James  
Wilkinson, Max  
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
Wilson, Munira  
Wood, Mike  
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
Wrigley, Martin  
Young, Claire

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Mr Richard Holden and  
Rebecca Smith



## NOES

Abbott, Jack  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Akehurst, Luke  
 Alaba, Mr Bayo  
 Aldridge, Dan  
 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, Olivia  
 Baines, David  
 Baker, Richard  
 Bance, Antonia  
 Barker, Paula  
 Barron, Lee  
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
 Baxter, Johanna  
 Beales, Danny  
 Beavers, Lorraine  
 Begum, Apsana  
 Bell, Torsten  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Billington, Ms Polly  
 Bishop, Matt  
 Blake, Olivia  
 Blake, Rachel  
 Bloore, Chris  
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burke, Maureen  
 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  
 Carling, Sam  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Charters, Mr Luke  
 Clark, Feryal  
 Coleman, Ben  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy

Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creagh, Mary  
 Creasy, Ms Stella  
 Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris  
 Daby, Janet  
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Darlington, Emily  
 Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 Dean, Josh  
 Dearden, Kate  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dixon, Anna  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Downie, Graeme  
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Eastwood, Colum  
 Eccles, Cat  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Efford, Clive  
 Egan, Damien  
 Ellis, Maya  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Entwistle, Kirith  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Ferguson, Mark  
 Ferguson, Patricia  
 Fleet, Natalie  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gardner, Dr Allison  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 German, Gill  
 Gilbert, Tracy  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gittins, Becky  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Goldsborough, Ben  
 Grady, John  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Haigh, rh Louise  
 Hall, Sarah  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harris, Carolyn

Hatton, Lloyd  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire  
 Hume, Alison  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Ingham, Leigh  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Jogee, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Jones, rh Darren  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Louise  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Josan, Gurinder Singh  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kane, Chris  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Kendall, rh Liz  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lamb, Peter  
 Law, Noah  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 Macdonald, Alice  
 MacNae, Andy  
 Madders, Justin  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Martin, Amanda  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mather, Keir  
 Mayer, Alex  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McNeill, Kirsty  
 Midgley, Anneliese  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Moon, Perran

Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe  
 Mullane, Margaret  
 Murphy, Luke  
 Murray, Chris  
 Murray, James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Myer, Luke  
 Naish, James  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 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  
 Phillipson, rh Bridget  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Race, Steve  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reed, rh Steve  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Richards, Jake  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Mrs Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sackman, Sarah  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Sowards, Mr Mark  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick

Smyth, Karin  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Sullivan, Kirsteen  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, David  
 Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turley, Anna  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Karl  
 Turner, Laurence

Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Walker, Imogen  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Welsh, Michelle  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Williams, David  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Woodcock, Sean  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
 Gerald Jones and  
 Anna McMorris

*Question accordingly negated.*

### Clause 5

#### REMOVAL OF RELIEF

*Amendment proposed:* 7, page 5, line 37, leave out from “persons” to end of line 38 and insert—

“who have special educational needs.

(5A) In subsection (5) ‘special educational needs’ has the same meaning as in section 20 (When a child or young person has special educational needs) of the Children and Families Act 2014.”—(*David Simmonds.*)

*This amendment would mean that a school that is wholly or mainly concerned with providing education to persons with special educational needs would not be a private school for the purposes of the Act, and as a result would retain charitable relief from non-domestic rates.*

*Question put,* That the amendment be made.

*The House divided:* Ayes 172, Noes 341.

### Division No. 85]

[6.27 pm

#### AYES

Adam, Shockat  
 Amos, Gideon  
 Anderson, Lee  
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Andrew, rh Stuart  
 Aquarone, Steff  
 Argar, rh Edward  
 Babarinde, Josh  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
 Barclay, rh Steve  
 Bennett, Alison  
 Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Bool, Sarah  
 Bowie, Andrew  
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen  
 Braverman, rh Suella  
 Brewer, Alex  
 Brown-Fuller, Jess  
 Burghart, Alex  
 Cane, Charlotte  
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
 Cartledge, James  
 Chadwick, David  
 Chamberlain, Wendy  
 Chambers, Dr Danny  
 Chope, Sir Christopher  
 Cleverly, rh Mr James  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Cocking, Lewis  
 Coghlan, Chris  
 Collins, Victoria

Cooper, Daisy  
 Cooper, John  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
 Cross, Harriet  
 Dance, Adam  
 Darling, Steve  
 Davey, rh Ed  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Mims  
 Dean, Bobby  
 Dewhurst, Charlie  
 Dillon, Mr Lee  
 Dinenege, Dame Caroline  
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Forster, Mr Will  
 Fortune, Peter  
 Fox, Sir Ashley  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Franklin, Zöe  
 Freeman, George  
 Gale, rh Sir Roger  
 Garnier, Mark  
 George, Andrew  
 Glen, rh John  
 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  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hunt, rh Jeremy  
 Hussain, Mr Adnan  
 Jardine, Christine  
 Jarvis, Liz  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Jones, Clive  
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
 Khan, Ayoub  
 Kohler, Mr Paul  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lam, Katie  
 Lamont, John  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Lopez, Julia  
 MacCleary, James  
 MacDonald, Mr Angus  
 Maguire, Ben  
 Maguire, Helen  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Martin, Mike  
 Mathew, Brian  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Maynard, Charlie  
 McMurdoch, James  
 McVey, rh Esther  
 van Mierlo, Freddie  
 Miller, Calum  
 Milne, John  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohamed, Iqbal  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morgan, Helen  
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Susan  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 Obese-Jecty, Ben  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Olney, Sarah  
 Paul, Rebecca  
 Perteghella, Manuela  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Pinkerton, Dr Al  
 Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Rankin, Jack  
 Reed, David  
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
 Robertson, Joe  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Sabine, Anna  
 Savage, Dr Roz  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil  
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
 Simmonds, David  
 Slade, Vikki  
 Smart, Lisa  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, rh Sir Julian  
 Snowden, Mr Andrew  
 Sollom, Ian  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, Patrick  
 Stafford, Gregory  
 Stephenson, Blake  
 Stone, Jamie  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Taylor, Luke  
 Thomas, Bradley  
 Thomas, Cameron  
 Tice, Richard  
 Timothy, Nick  
 Trott, rh Laura  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Voaden, Caroline  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wild, James  
 Wilkinson, Max  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wilson, Munira  
 Wood, Mike  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Wrigley, Martin  
 Young, Claire

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
 Mr Richard Holden and  
 Rebecca Smith

## NOES

Abbott, Jack  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Akehurst, Luke  
 Alaba, Mr Bayo  
 Aldridge, Dan  
 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, Olivia  
 Baines, David  
 Baker, Richard  
 Bance, Antonia  
 Barker, Paula  
 Barron, Lee  
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
 Baxter, Johanna  
 Beales, Danny  
 Beavers, Lorraine  
 Begum, Apsana  
 Bell, Torsten  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Billington, Ms Polly  
 Bishop, Matt  
 Blake, Olivia  
 Blake, Rachel  
 Bloore, Chris  
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burke, Maureen  
 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  
 Carling, Sam  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Charters, Mr Luke  
 Chowns, Ellie  
 Clark, Feryal  
 Coleman, Ben  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy  
 Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creagh, Mary  
 Creasy, Ms Stella  
 Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris  
 Daby, Janet  
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Darlington, Emily  
 Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 Dean, Josh  
 Dearden, Kate  
 Denyer, Carla  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dixon, Anna  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Downie, Graeme  
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eastwood, Colum  
 Eccles, Cat  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Efford, Clive  
 Egan, Damien  
 Ellis, Maya  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Entwistle, Kirith  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Ferguson, Mark  
 Ferguson, Patricia  
 Fleet, Natalie  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gardner, Dr Allison  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 German, Gill  
 Gilbert, Tracy  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gittins, Becky  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Goldsborough, Ben  
 Grady, John  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Haigh, rh Louise  
 Hall, Sarah  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma

Harris, Carolyn  
 Hatton, Lloyd  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire  
 Hume, Alison  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Ingham, Leigh  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Jogee, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Jones, rh Darren  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Louise  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Josan, Gurinder Singh  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kane, Chris  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Kendall, rh Liz  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lamb, Peter  
 Law, Noah  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 Macdonald, Alice  
 MacNae, Andy  
 Madders, Justin  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Martin, Amanda  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mather, Keir  
 Mayer, Alex  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McNeill, Kirsty  
 Midgley, Anneliese  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Moon, Perran  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe  
 Mullane, Margaret  
 Murphy, Luke  
 Murray, Chris  
 Murray, James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Myer, Luke  
 Naish, James  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 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  
 Phillipson, rh Bridget  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Race, Steve  
 Ramsay, Adrian  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reed, rh Steve  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Richards, Jake  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Mrs Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sackman, Sarah  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Sowards, Mr Mark  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff



Smith, Nick  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Stainbank, Euan  
Stevens, rh Jo  
Stewart, Elaine  
Stone, Will  
Strathern, Alistair  
Strickland, Alan  
Stringer, Graham  
Sullivan, Kirsteen  
Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
Sultana, Zarah  
Swallow, Peter  
Tami, rh Mark  
Tapp, Mike  
Taylor, David  
Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote  
cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
Thompson, Adam  
Tidball, Dr Marie  
Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
Toale, Jessica  
Trickett, Jon  
Tufnell, Henry  
Turley, Anna  
Turmaine, Matt  
Turner, Karl

Turner, Laurence  
Twigg, Derek  
Twist, Liz  
Uppal, Harpreet  
Vaughan, Tony  
Vaz, rh Valerie  
Vince, Chris  
Wakeford, Christian  
Walker, Imogen  
Ward, Chris  
Ward, Melanie  
Waugh, Paul  
Webb, Chris  
Welsh, Michelle  
West, Catherine  
Western, Andrew  
Western, Matt  
Wheeler, Michael  
White, Jo  
White, Katie  
Williams, David  
Witherden, Steve  
Woodcock, Sean  
Wrighting, Rosie  
Yang, Yuan  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Yemm, Steve  
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Anna McMorris and  
Gerald Jones

*Question accordingly negated.*

*Third Reading*

6.40 pm

**Jim McMahon:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge all who have contributed to the Bill's passage through this House, particularly my private office team, for the support that they have offered during this process, officials in my Department, for the outstanding work that they have done, and colleagues in the Department for Education and the Treasury, as well as Clerks of the House, for supporting the process of this Bill.

The Bill honours the Government's manifesto pledge to end business rates charitable rate relief for private schools in England and to fundamentally reform the business rates system. We are kickstarting this endeavour through the introduction of lower tax rates for retail, hospitality, and leisure properties.

I thank all Members who contributed to the evidence sessions, the Committee stage and today's debate. I hope, even though there were disagreements on parts of the new clauses and on the amendments, that there is at least an acknowledgment that we have gone a long way to ensure that we get to the heart of what this Bill is intended to do when it comes to the high street and our town centres. In the end, whatever the differences—and let us be honest there are plenty—we all know how important our small businesses are to the viability of our high streets. We all recognise that these are more than just places in which to do business; they are places that people look to as the heart of their community. They are always more than the sum of their parts. Hopefully, Members will see that these measures will really make a dent in this area.

I also place on the record our thanks to those who gave evidence to the Public Bill Committee, including: the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation; the British Retail Consortium; the Co-op Group; M&S; the Shopkeepers' Campaign; the British Property Federation; and the Independent Schools Council. They have enabled us to scrutinise the Bill properly and to get evidence from professionals who understand what things are like on the ground, and that, I believe, added value to the process.

I thank those who attended and gave evidence in Committee for their time and willingness to share their expertise. I also wish to extend my thanks to hon. Members who attended the Public Bill Committee to ask questions, to foster debate, and to contribute to discussions as we take these important first steps to transform the business rates system.

The Bill will help to secure additional funding to enable the Government to deliver their commitments to the majority of children who attend state schools, which is the second part of this Bill. Ending tax breaks for private schools is a tough but necessary decision. It will come as welcome news to most parents in England, as it represents the Government's determination to break down the barriers to opportunity and ensure that all children get a high-quality education. Let us be absolutely clear: more than 90% of children in this country go to state schools and they deserve the best, too. Now they are going to get it.

Let me assure Members that the education system in England is prepared for the relatively small number of pupils who may move as a result of the measures in this Bill. Much of what we have heard about churn in the system is not supported by the evidence and, in the end, it runs the risk of scaremongering. We need to reflect on the fact that there has always been change in the system, even before these measures were introduced. Importantly, we are organising to make sure that parents and pupils receive support if they need it, but we believe that will be around the edges.

The Bill will also provide certainty to high streets by making provision to introduce a permanent tax cut for retail, hospitality and leisure properties. We have heard a lot about the change from the covid relief to the permanent, baked-in relief that we are providing through the Bill. The Opposition have said a number of times during the Bill's passage that it represents a reduction, but a degree of honesty is required. The Opposition know, as do we, that there was no provision—not a single pound or penny—for the continuation of the temporary relief provided during covid on which retailers, hospitality providers and leisure providers were relying.

The Opposition know that that is a fact, as do we. The only difference is that while the Opposition were willing to political point score, while businesses were waiting for maturity and for an answer to the problem, we were getting on with the job of government, and providing the permanent support that businesses need. How will we pay for it? We have heard the Opposition say a lot that they do not support measures, but they always support the investment. They support the investment in state schools, but not the measures to generate the income. They support the measures to support high streets, but seem not to support the measures to ensure that premises with a value of £500,000 or more pay more into the pot.

The reality is that this has not just come out of the blue. The Conservatives had 14 years to address the imbalance from the online to the on-street, from the out-of-town to the in-town, and they did nothing, so it is, frankly, ridiculous for them to try to present themselves during the passage of the Bill as the champions of enterprise, of our town centres and of small businesses. They now have an opportunity. We have sorted out the amendments—they were nonsense, and most people would accept that—but on Third Reading we get to vote on the substance of the Bill. The Opposition could do the right thing. They could change course and back support for state schools to get them the money that they need. They could back measures to get money to the high street in our town centres and do the right thing. Now is the time to show that they will be the mature Opposition that they promised to be, but I expect that that will not be the path they choose. Luckily, the Government are getting on with the job. I commend the Bill to the House.

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

6.47 pm

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank the Minister, and indeed my shadow Ministers, the other Opposition spokespeople and all parliamentarians who have helped with the passage of the Bill, as well as the Clerks and officials—not that I would like to see the Bill progress any further. Aristotle, in his book “Politics”, over 2,000 years ago—[*Interruption.*]

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

**Kevin Hollinrake:** Over 2,000 years ago, Aristotle talked about deviant government. Alongside tyranny, he placed democracy. He said the risk is that, sooner or later, a Government will come along who represent only their own interests and those of their supporters, and that that Government will pursue the politics of envy. Let us see who the Minister’s supporters are. They are not the 12.6 million pensioners in this country, if we judge by the winter fuel allowance; not the 89,500 farmers whose livelihoods will be damaged by the family farm tax; not the 5 million businesspeople who will be damaged by the changes to business property relief, who employ 14 million people and pay £200 billion a year in taxes; not those people who live in rural areas; and not the families of the 550,000 young people who are in private and independent education. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies—this is not scaremongering—90,000 of them may go back into the state sector as a result of the Government’s choices.

The Government have the gall to say that the fact that business rates or VAT do not apply to school fees is a tax break. It is no more a tax break than there being no VAT on housing, children’s clothes or food. Those measures are there because we should encourage people to pursue education, particularly those who scrimp and save to send their children into private education.

What about businesses? Businesses are suffering on the back of the employer national insurance rise of £25 billion a year, and are worried about the future because of the withdrawal of business property relief and agricultural property relief. The reality is that this Bill means a cut in support for many of those whom the

Minister said he seeks to protect—people who work in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. The 75% discount is down to 40%. That will mean a tangible difference for the average pub of £5,500 a year. That comes on top of the huge increases in employer national insurance. Some 250,000 businesses will be worse off to the tune of £925 million. That is the tax charge he is placing on those businesses he says he seeks to protect. If he is honest with them, those taxes will go up again in April 2026. That is the reality of the situation.

What promise did Labour make before the election? They said they would scrap business rates completely—another broken promise. In their manifesto, they said they would change the balance between high streets and the online giants. That is not what the Bill does. The Bill also taxes breweries, airports, football stadiums and bricks-and-mortar retailers such as John Lewis, Sainsbury’s and Morrisons. That is the reality behind the Government’s changes: not scrapping business rates, nothing on the online giants and big taxes on many businesses. This is the politics of envy. It is the tyranny of socialism, and that is why we will vote against the Bill.

*Question put,* That the Bill be now read the Third time.

*The House divided:* Ayes 341, Noes 171.

**Division No. 86]**

**[6.52 pm**

#### AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i> )	Blake, Olivia
Abbott, Jack	Blake, Rachel
Abrahams, Debbie	Bloore, Chris
Akehurst, Luke	Blundell, Mrs Elsie ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i> )
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Bonavia, Kevin
Aldridge, Dan	Botterill, Jade
Alexander, rh Heidi	Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Brash, Mr Jonathan
Ali, Rushanara	Buckley, Julia
Ali, Tahir	Burgon, Richard
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Burke, Maureen
Amesbury, Mike ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i> )	Burton-Sampson, David
Anderson, Callum	Butler, Dawn
Anderson, Fleur	Byrne, Ian
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Byrne, rh Liam
Arthur, Dr Scott	Cadbury, Ruth
Asato, Jess	Caliskan, Nesil
Asser, James	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Athwal, Jas	Campbell, Irene
Atkinson, Catherine	Campbell, Juliet
Atkinson, Lewis	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Bailey, Olivia	Carling, Sam
Baines, David	Champion, Sarah
Baker, Richard	Charalambous, Bambos
Bance, Antonia	Charters, Mr Luke
Barker, Paula	Chowns, Ellie
Barron, Lee	Clark, Feryal
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Coleman, Ben
Baxter, Johanna	Collinge, Lizzi
Beales, Danny	Collins, Tom
Beavers, Lorraine	Conlon, Liam
Begum, Apsana	Cooper, Andrew
Bell, Torsten	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Benn, rh Hilary	Costigan, Deirdre
Betts, Mr Clive	Cox, Pam
Billington, Ms Polly	Coyle, Neil
Bishop, Matt	Craft, Jen
	Creagh, Mary
	Creasy, Ms Stella

Crichton, Torcuil  
Curtis, Chris  
Daby, Janet  
Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
Dalton, Ashley  
Darlington, Emily  
Davies, Jonathan  
Davies, Paul  
De Cordova, Marsha  
Dean, Josh  
Dearden, Kate  
Denyer, Carla  
Dickson, Jim  
Dixon, Anna  
Dixon, Samantha  
Dodds, rh Anneliese  
Dollimore, Helena  
Dowd, Peter  
Downie, Graeme  
Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
Eagle, Dame Angela  
Eastwood, Colum  
Eccles, Cat  
Edwards, Lauren  
Efford, Clive  
Egan, Damien  
Ellis, Maya  
Elmore, Chris  
Entwistle, Kirith  
Eshalomi, Florence  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Fahnbulleh, Miatta  
Farnsworth, Linsey  
Ferguson, Mark  
Ferguson, Patricia  
Fleet, Natalie  
Foody, Emma  
Fookes, Catherine  
Foster, Mr Paul  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Francis, Daniel  
Frith, Mr James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gardner, Dr Allison  
Gelder, Anna  
Gemmell, Alan  
German, Gill  
Gilbert, Tracy  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Gittins, Becky  
Glindon, Mary  
Goldsbrough, Ben  
Grady, John  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Griffith, Dame Nia  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Hack, Amanda  
Haigh, rh Louise  
Hall, Sarah  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hamilton, Paulette  
Hardy, Emma  
Harris, Carolyn  
Hatton, Lloyd  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayes, Tom  
Hazelgrove, Claire  
Healey, rh John  
Hillier, Dame Meg  
Hinchliff, Chris  
Hinder, Jonathan  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire  
Hume, Alison  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hurley, Patrick  
Ingham, Leigh  
Irons, Natasha  
Jameson, Sally  
Jarvis, Dan  
Jogee, Adam  
Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
Jones, rh Darren  
Jones, Lillian  
Jones, Louise  
Jones, Ruth  
Josan, Gurinder Singh  
Joseph, Sojan  
Juss, Warinder  
Kane, Chris  
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Kendall, rh Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Khan, Naushabah  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kirkham, Jayne  
Kitchen, Gen  
Kumar, Sonia  
Kyle, rh Peter  
Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
Lamb, Peter  
Law, Noah  
Leadbeater, Kim  
Leishman, Brian  
Lewin, Andrew  
Lewis, Clive  
Lightwood, Simon  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
MacAlister, Josh  
Macdonald, Alice  
MacNae, Andy  
Madders, Justin  
Malhotra, Seema  
Martin, Amanda  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mather, Keir  
Mayer, Alex  
McAllister, Douglas  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McCluskey, Martin  
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Chris  
McEvoy, Lola  
McGovern, Alison  
McKee, Gordon  
McKenna, Kevin  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McNeill, Kirsty  
Midgley, Anneliese  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Mishra, Navendu  
Moon, Perran  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Grahame  
Morris, Joe  
Mullane, Margaret  
Murphy, Luke  
Murray, Chris

Murray, James  
Murray, Katrina  
Myer, Luke  
Naish, James  
Narayan, Kanishka  
Newbury, Josh  
Niblett, Samantha  
Nichols, Charlotte  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Opher, Dr Simon  
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
Osamor, Kate  
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  
Phillipson, rh Bridget  
Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
Pitcher, Lee  
Powell, rh Lucy  
Poynton, Gregor  
Prinsley, Peter  
Quigley, Mr Richard  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Race, Steve  
Ramsay, Adrian  
Rand, Mr Connor  
Ranger, Andrew  
Reader, Mike  
Reed, rh Steve  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reynolds, Emma  
Reynolds, rh Jonathan  
Rhodes, Martin  
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
Richards, Jake  
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Robertson, Dave  
Roca, Tim  
Rodda, Matt  
Rushworth, Sam  
Russell, Mrs Sarah  
Rutland, Tom  
Ryan, Oliver  
Sackman, Sarah  
Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
Sewards, Mr Mark  
Shah, Naz  
Shanks, Michael  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Slaughter, Andy  
Slinger, John  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, David  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Nick  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Stainbank, Euan  
Stevens, rh Jo  
Stewart, Elaine  
Stone, Will  
Strathern, Alistair  
Strickland, Alan  
Stringer, Graham  
Sullivan, Kirsteen  
Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
Sultana, Zarah  
Swallow, Peter  
Tami, rh Mark  
Tapp, Mike  
Taylor, David  
Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
Thompson, Adam  
Tidball, Dr Marie  
Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
Toale, Jessica  
Trickett, Jon  
Tufnell, Henry  
Turley, Anna  
Turmaine, Matt  
Turner, Karl  
Turner, Laurence  
Twigg, Derek  
Twist, Liz  
Uppal, Harpreet  
Vaz, rh Valerie  
Vince, Chris  
Wakeford, Christian  
Walker, Imogen  
Ward, Chris  
Ward, Melanie  
Waugh, Paul  
Webb, Chris  
Welsh, Michelle  
West, Catherine  
Western, Andrew  
Western, Matt  
Wheeler, Michael  
White, Jo  
White, Katie  
Williams, David  
Witherden, Steve  
Woodcock, Sean  
Wrighting, Rosie  
Yang, Yuan  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Yemm, Steve  
Zeichner, Daniel  
**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
Gerald Jones and  
Anna McMorris

**NOES**

Adam, Shockat  
Amos, Gideon  
Anderson, Lee  
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
Andrew, rh Stuart  
Aqarone, Steff  
Argar, rh Edward  
Babarinde, Josh  
Bacon, Gareth



Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
 Barclay, rh Steve  
 Bennett, Alison  
 Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Bool, Sarah  
 Bowie, Andrew  
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen  
 Braverman, rh Suella  
 Brewer, Alex  
 Brown-Fuller, Jess  
 Burghart, Alex  
 Cane, Charlotte  
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
 Cartlidge, James  
 Chadwick, David  
 Chamberlain, Wendy  
 Chambers, Dr Danny  
 Chope, Sir Christopher  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Cocking, Lewis  
 Coghlan, Chris  
 Collins, Victoria  
 Cooper, Daisy  
 Cooper, John  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
 Cross, Harriet  
 Dance, Adam  
 Darling, Steve  
 Davey, rh Ed  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davis, rh David  
 Dean, Bobby  
 Dewhurst, Charlie  
 Dillon, Mr Lee  
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline  
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Farron, Tim  
 Forster, Mr Will  
 Fortune, Peter  
 Fox, Sir Ashley  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Franklin, Zöe  
 Freeman, George  
 Gale, rh Sir Roger  
 Garnier, Mark  
 George, Andrew  
 Glen, rh John  
 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  
 Holden, rh Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hunt, rh Jeremy  
 Hussain, Mr Adnan  
 Jardine, Christine  
 Jarvis, Liz  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Jones, Clive  
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
 Khan, Ayoub  
 Kohler, Mr Paul  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lam, Katie  
 Lamont, John  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Lopez, Julia  
 MacCleary, James  
 MacDonald, Mr Angus  
 Maguire, Ben  
 Maguire, Helen  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Martin, Mike  
 Mathew, Brian  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 Maynard, Charlie  
 McMurdock, James  
 McVey, rh Esther  
 van Mierlo, Freddie  
 Miller, Calum  
 Milne, John

Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohamed, Iqbal  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morgan, Helen  
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murray, Susan  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 Obese-Jecty, Ben  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Olney, Sarah  
 Paul, Rebecca  
 Perteghella, Manuela  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Pinkerton, Dr Al  
 Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Rankin, Jack  
 Reed, David  
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
 Robertson, Joe  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Sabine, Anna  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil  
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
 Simmonds, David

Slade, Vikki  
 Smart, Lisa  
 Smith, rh Sir Julian  
 Snowden, Mr Andrew  
 Sollom, Ian  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, Patrick  
 Stafford, Gregory  
 Stephenson, Blake  
 Stone, Jamie  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Taylor, Luke  
 Thomas, Bradley  
 Thomas, Cameron  
 Tice, Richard  
 Timothy, Nick  
 Trott, rh Laura  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Voaden, Caroline  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wild, James  
 Wilkinson, Max  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wilson, Munira  
 Wood, Mike  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Wrigley, Martin  
 Young, Claire

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
 Rebecca Smith and  
 Greg Smith

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Bill read the Third time and passed.*

## Business without Debate

### BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (16 JANUARY)

*Ordered,*

That, at the sitting on Thursday 16 January, the business determined for that day by the Backbench Business Committee may be proceeded with until 5.00pm or for 90 minutes, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; those proceedings may be entered upon and continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

## Endometriosis: Women in the Workplace

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

7.4 pm

**Gill Furniss** (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise the plight of women with endometriosis and the everyday struggles they face in the workplace.

Endometriosis was first identified in 1860, but progress in improving the lives of women suffering from it has moved at a glacial pace since then. As the Women and Equalities Committee so accurately put it:

“Women and girls are missing out on their education, career opportunities, relationships, social lives and are having their fertility impacted because of neglected reproductive health conditions.”

This debate focuses on the impact of endometriosis on women in the workplace. I chose this specific focus of attention because an examination of all the issues facing women with this condition would far exceed the time constraints of an Adjournment debate; it would span an entire Parliament and more.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for raising this massive issue. I have in my office a girl who joined as a 16-year-old and has been with me for almost 12 years. She got married on new year's day. At the age of 28, she had menopause to try to help her endometriosis. As a caring employer, I obviously made sure that she had all the days off that she needed, but not every workplace will ensure that such women get the time off that they should. Does the hon. Lady agree that, although the debate will raise awareness, there is a role for the Government to ensure that there is training for businesses so that they understand their obligations?

**Gill Furniss:** I thank the hon. Member for that point.

The issue has been known about for a long time. The women's health strategy, published in 2022, painted a picture of what workplaces should be like over the next 10 years, arguing that women should

“feel able to speak openly about their health and to be confident that they will be supported by their employer and workplace colleagues, with an end to taboos”

and that

“women experiencing women's health issues such as period problems, endometriosis, fertility treatment, miscarriage and menopause” must

“feel well supported in their workplaces.”

This is a far cry from the reality facing women in the workplace today.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): It is fortuitous that you are in the Chair tonight, Madam Deputy Speaker, given all the work you did on these issues in the last Parliament as Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

I think that the hon. Lady attended my Westminster Hall last year, and I am grateful to her for securing this Adjournment debate. As a direct consequence of my Westminster Hall debate, Essex police contacted me, saying, “We are looking into doing this. Can you give us advice on the workplace?” It was a great example of the

impact of this place, and employers will be listening to her debate. Des she agree that education and sunlight will help a lot of employers make the right decisions?

**Gill Furniss:** I thank the right hon. Member for that intervention, and I absolutely agree. I pay tribute to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the right hon. Member for the efforts he has put in over many years.

Stigma and a lack of awareness by employers means that reproductive health conditions can have a significant effect on women's experiences at work. It is almost impossible to remain at work when suffering from chronic pain and the mental toll that these conditions cause.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the fantastic speech she is making. Endometriosis UK, which provides the secretariat of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis, of which I am the chair, released a report last year that found that 47% of women had visited their GP 10 or more times with symptoms prior to diagnosis. Many of those women are likely to face issues with getting time off work to attend these appointments, or experience some form of disciplinary action because of it. Does my hon. Friend agree that being understanding and tolerant about the number of appointments needed to secure a diagnosis is critical to being an endometriosis-friendly employer, and that, ultimately, we need to take steps to ensure that the process does not take several years and so many appointments?

**Gill Furniss:** I thank my hon. Friend. The average length of time taken is now eight years, which is not good.

Many women feel unable to speak openly about endometriosis as they would other conditions, as if it were something to be ashamed of. Research shows that 23% of women take time off work because of period health issues while 80% lie about reasons for absence if they are related to periods. Having said that, endometriosis is not just about periods; it is a whole-body complaint. I do not think there is an organ in the body up to the chest that has not been found to be affected by what is a crippling disease.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke:** I want to build on what the hon. Lady said about endometriosis in the workplace. The condition often comes with infection of the digestive system, which can make many women incontinent to the point that they suddenly have to run. That is important to consider, as this is not just about appointments and time off but the conditions in which people work and the understanding they need from their colleagues and bosses.

**Gill Furniss:** I completely agree, and it has serious consequences. Women may need to have a stoma because of the damage done to their bowels. The right hon. Member and I have both met quite young women their 20s who have needed to have hysterectomies and will never be able to bear a child.

Endometriosis should not mean that women have to put their careers on hold and leave the jobs they have worked hard to get. Employers can take simple steps such as offering flexible working, access to period products and time off to attend appointments to build the type of workplace envisioned in the women's health strategy.

I am pleased that the Government have brought forward the Employment Rights Bill, which will be the biggest boost to workers' rights in a generation. That offers the perfect opportunity to begin to change the workplace experience of women with endometriosis.

**Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. As she mentioned, endometriosis can have a knock-on effect on many areas of a woman's life. It can affect mental health, and it can also have an impact on fertility, yet there is no statutory right to time off work for fertility treatment, or indeed in many other scenarios. Does she agree that we should welcome the support that employers provide in this area and encourage others to do much more to support women going through endometriosis and so many other difficult conditions?

**Gill Furniss:** I thank my hon. Friend for that point, and I completely agree.

Although the Employment Rights Bill does require large employers to publish equality action plans, there is no specific mention of reproductive conditions. What discussions is the Minister having with her colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade to ensure that those issues are not forgotten?

What hope can we have that employers will understand the condition if even some medical professionals do not? All too often, we have heard stories from women who have been told, "It's just a heavy period" and, "Suck it up—every woman goes through this."

**Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): I met women from the endometriosis support group in Derby, and so many reported that they had had to give up work because of their symptoms as well as the huge delays in their diagnosis and treatment. Does my hon. Friend agree that until this gets real priority and understanding, we will continue to lose out on the talents and skills of women with endometriosis?

**Gill Furniss:** Absolutely, and I will come to that shortly.

That leaves women feeling dismissed, ignored and belittled by the very people who should be helping them. The result is that it takes almost nine years on average to get a diagnosis of endometriosis in the UK. I therefore look forward to hearing from the Minister on the steps she is taking to promote better awareness.

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Gill Furniss:** I am sorry; I have got to make progress.

I do not underestimate the task for Ministers in fixing our NHS after it was left in tatters by the previous Government. Waiting lists for gynaecological care have grown faster than those for any other specialty in recent years, leaving many women in agony. The women's health strategy correctly identified some of these chronic issues, but in the absence of funding to back that up, we have gone further and further backwards from what we need.

For instance, women's health hubs have improved women's access to healthcare services, but the previous Government failed to give them long-term certainty

and their funding is set to run out in March. As the Government work hard to rebuild the NHS, improving gynaecological care must be at the centre of that, because women have waited long enough. Will the Minister therefore update the House on how the Government will implement the measures in the women's health strategy?

We must continue to encourage research into endometriosis. Our world-leading researchers are doing vital work in clinical trials to find better ways to manage and treat this condition. They will not stop until they find a cure. Therefore, will the Minister outline what steps she is taking to support clinical research and ensure that women are able to get on to those clinical trials? If we have a cure, it is obvious that we will not have any of the problems that I have spoken about.

I commend the Women and Equalities Committee on its excellent report into women's reproductive health conditions. It has made a number of recommendations, including on employment rights, and I look forward to reading the Government's response. I hope that they will listen to calls to give specific mention to reproductive health as part of the Employment Rights Bill, which has cross-party support. I also praise Endometriosis UK for its invaluable work in supporting women with this condition and campaigning for change. It acts as the secretariat for the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis, of which I am an officer.

**Kirsteen Sullivan:** I thank my hon. Friend for securing this critical debate. With an average of eight-plus years for a diagnosis, does she agree that employers must build a more supportive and flexible approach that embeds policies to help women, such the endo-friendly employers scheme? Will she join me in thanking campaigners such as the Endo Warriors West Lothian for their tireless awareness-raising efforts?

**Gill Furniss:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right—that is what we are talking about. For many years, the APPG was chaired by our dear friend David Amess. David campaigned tirelessly for improvements to endometriosis care, and he will forever remain on our minds as we continue his legacy.

7.16 pm

**The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) on securing this important debate on the impact of endometriosis on women in the workplace. In opposition I supported the work of the APPG. I echo the praise for the campaigning work of Endometriosis UK and the support that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and others in the Chamber have given to the APPG. I also remember the work of our friend David Amess. I echo the recognition of the recent report by the Women and Equalities Committee on reproductive health conditions. My Department is working across Government on our response, which will be published in due course.

I welcome the progress made on raising awareness—we are moving very fast on this—and on providing better support for women's health conditions, including endometriosis. Nevertheless, this Government recognise that women with endometriosis have been failed for far too long, and we acknowledge the impact that it has on women's lives, relationships and participation in education



and the workforce. There is still much more work to be done. We are committed to improving support for any women and girls whose periods or women's conditions disrupt their normal life, work or education.

In addition to receiving support in the workplace, all women should have access to healthcare support to help diagnose and manage this condition. We are making progress to ensure that those with endometriosis receive a timely diagnosis and effective treatment.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke:** There has been a lot of cross-party work on this issue. I led a debate—the last one before the general election was called, I think—on endometriosis education. It is not prescribed that schools should educate about what a bad period is—I still meet women born in this century who do not know. If someone does not know what a disease is, how do they know that they have it? I urge the Minister to ensure that those messages are pushed in the Department for Education, as we need to ensure that people know what diseases they could have.

**Karin Smyth:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that point, which I will talk about later.

On the Employment Rights Bill, our plan to make work pay sets out a significant and ambitious agenda to ensure that workplace rights are fit for a modern economy, empowering working people and contributing to economic growth. On 10 October, the Government fulfilled their manifesto commitment to introduce legislation within 100 days of entering office, by introducing the Employment Rights Bill. As part of the Bill, we are taking the first steps towards requiring employers to publish action plans alongside their gender pay gap figures. The relevant clause sets out that regulations may require employers to develop and publish action plans relating to gender equality, which include measures to address the gender pay gap and support employees going through the menopause. It deliberately does not provide an exhaustive list of matters related to gender equality, giving us the scope to be led by the actions themselves. This reflects the fact that many of the actions employers take will be beneficial for people in a lot of different circumstances; for example, improved provision of flexible working can be valuable for an employee balancing childcare as well as someone managing a health condition such as endometriosis.

In the same way, ensuring that employers support staff going through the menopause will necessitate them taking steps that are positive for supporting women's health in the workplace more broadly. For example, menopause best practice includes greater discussion around women's health and awareness of potential workplace adjustments—things that have a much wider potential benefit. As my hon. Friend said, we need to start to reduce the stigma and taboos and remove them from the debate.

Through the Employment Rights Bill, the Government are also making statutory sick pay payable from the first day of sickness absence. This will particularly benefit those who suffer from conditions such as endometriosis, who may need to take time off to manage a flare up. We are also removing the lower earnings limit and extending statutory sick pay to up to 1.3 million additional low-paid employees, particularly benefiting women, young people and those in part-time work.

The Minister for Equalities, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), leads for the Government on the Bill from the equalities team, and I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough that we are working with her and talking about this issue throughout the Government. For example, I regularly join Women and Equalities questions here in the Chamber to make sure we work closely together, and I will continue to work closely with colleagues on these issues.

The new measures we are seeking to introduce build on existing Government support for employers, which recognises their key role in increasing employment opportunities and supporting disabled people and those with health conditions to thrive as part of the workforce. The Government's current offer to employers includes a digital information service that provides tailored guidance to businesses to support employees to remain in work. That includes guidance on health disclosures and having conversations about health, as well as guidance on legal obligations including statutory sick pay and reasonable adjustments. The service is available across Britain and can currently be accessed from a range of trusted locations, including both the Health and Safety Executive and ACAS websites. We are also taking steps to better understand the challenges faced by women with endometriosis in the workplace and to improve workplace support for those with the condition.

The Government health and wellbeing fund has awarded almost £2 million to 16 voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations leading projects focused on supporting women who experience reproductive health issues to remain in or return to the workplace, including a project on endometriosis delivered by Endometriosis UK.

An Office for National Statistics study is investigating the impact of endometriosis on women's labour market outcomes. This important study will be a vital step to improving our understanding and will inform future actions policy work. The first publication in this research project, on the characteristics of women diagnosed with endometriosis in England between 2011 and 2021, was published in December.

In addition to providing workplace support for endometriosis, the Government are committed to improving healthcare support and ensuring that women with endometriosis can receive timely diagnosis and treatment. We recognise that patients have been let down for too long while they wait for the care they need. Nearly 600,000 women are on gynaecology waiting lists. It is unacceptable that patients are waiting too long to get the care they need. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough for her sympathy with the task of reducing those lists, but that is our priority. Cutting waiting lists, including for gynaecology, is a key part of our health mission and a top priority for this Government. We have committed to achieving the NHS constitutional standard that 92% of patients should wait no longer than 18 weeks from referral to treatment by the end of this Parliament, and that absolutely includes those waiting for gynaecology treatment.

My noble Friend Baroness Merron, the Minister responsible for patient safety, women's health and mental health, and I recently met with the Government's women's health ambassador, Professor Dame Lesley Regan, and NHS England to discuss progress on women's health and current issues including gynaecology waiting lists.

Following that meeting I am pleased that our recently published plan for reforming elective care sets out commitments to support the delivery of innovative models in gynaecology offering patients care closer to home and piloting gynaecology pathways in community diagnostic centres for patients with post-menopausal bleeding.

Enabling access to adequate healthcare support begins with providing high-quality education and information on menstrual health, as the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) highlighted, so that women and girls know when and how to seek help for symptoms such as heavy or painful periods. The compulsory aspects of the curriculum on relationships, sex and health education means all pupils are taught about several areas of women's health, including menstruation, contraception, fertility, pregnancy and menopause.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education has committed to providing teachers with clear guidance that focuses on the wellbeing of children. Her Department will look carefully at all relevant evidence and engage with stakeholders, including young people and parents, ahead of publishing a consultation response and the revised guidance later this year. I am pleased that Dame Lesley Regan, in her role as women's health ambassador, has been feeding women's health perspectives into this work.

My Department has worked with NHS England to improve and create new content on endometriosis symptoms, diagnosis and treatment options on the NHS website and YouTube channel. NHS England has also published a decision support tool for managing heavy periods to support women's understanding of their symptoms and appropriate treatment options to discuss with clinicians. Education and clinical guidelines support healthcare professionals to provide care for women with endometriosis.

The General Medical Council has introduced the medical licensing assessment for most incoming doctors, including all medical students graduating in the academic year 2024-25 and onwards. The content for the assessment includes several topics relating to women's health, including menstrual problems and endometriosis, and will encourage a better understanding of common women's health problems in all doctors as they start their careers in the UK, which we all want to see. Endometriosis is also already in the core curriculum for trainee GPs, obstetricians and gynaecologists.

Last year, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published updated guidelines on the diagnosis and treatment of endometriosis, and the new and updated recommendations on referral and investigation should help women receive a diagnosis more quickly. Through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, the Department has also commissioned a number of studies focused on endometriosis diagnosis and treatment and patient experience.

In closing, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough for tabling this debate and for her continued long-standing advocacy for women's health. Let me affirm the Government's commitment to supporting the many women who live with endometriosis in the workplace and beyond. This Government are committed to prioritising women's health as we build an NHS fit for the future. My noble friend Baroness Merron is carefully considering how we take forward the women's health strategy by aligning it to the Government's missions and forthcoming 10-year health plan, and women's equality will be at the heart of our missions. It is vital that we work with women to better understand their experiences and address their concerns, which have been ignored for far too long.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.27 pm

*House adjourned.*

## Deferred Divisions

### RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Electricity Capacity Mechanism (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 18 November 2024, be approved.

*The House divided: Ayes 418, Noes 78.*

### Division No. 80]

#### AYES

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

Byrne, Ian  
 Cadbury, Ruth  
 Caliskan, Nesil  
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
 Campbell, Irene  
 Campbell, Juliet  
 Campbell-Savours, Markus  
 Cane, Charlotte  
 Carling, Sam  
 Chadwick, David  
 Chamberlain, Wendy  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Charters, Mr Luke  
 Chowns, Ellie  
 Clark, Feryal  
 Coleman, Ben  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy  
 Cooper, Daisy  
 Cooper, rh Yvette  
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
 Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creagh, Mary  
 Creasy, Ms Stella  
 Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris  
 Daby, Janet  
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Dance, Adam  
 Darling, Steve  
 Darlington, Emily  
 Davey, rh Ed  
 Davies, Ann  
 Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 Dean, Bobby  
 Dean, Josh  
 Dearden, Kate  
 Denyer, Carla  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dillon, Mr Lee  
 Dixon, Anna  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Downie, Graeme  
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria

Eastwood, Colum  
 Eccles, Cat  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Efford, Clive  
 Egan, Damien  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Entwistle, Kirith  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Farron, Tim  
 Ferguson, Mark  
 Ferguson, Patricia  
 Fleet, Natalie  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Forster, Mr Will  
 Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Franklin, Zöe  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gardner, Dr Allison  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 George, Andrew  
 German, Gill  
 Gilbert, Tracy  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gilmour, Rachel  
 Gittins, Becky  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Glover, Olly  
 Goldman, Marie  
 Goldsborough, Ben  
 Gordon, Tom  
 Gould, Georgia  
 Grady, John  
 Green, Sarah  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Haigh, rh Louise  
 Hall, Sarah  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hanna, Claire  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hatton, Lloyd  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Healey, rh John  
 Heylings, Pippa  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Hobhouse, Wera  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire  
 Hume, Alison  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Ingham, Leigh  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Jogee, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Jones, Clive  
 Jones, rh Darren  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Louise  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Josan, Gurinder Singh  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kane, Chris  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Kendall, rh Liz  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Khan, Ayoub  
 Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kohler, Mr Paul  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kumaran, Uma  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lamb, Peter  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Noah  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 MacCleary, James  
 Macdonald, Alice  
 MacNae, Andy  
 Madders, Justin  
 Maguire, Ben  
 Mahmood, rh Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Martin, Amanda  
 Martin, Mike  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mather, Keir  
 Mathew, Brian  
 Mayer, Alex  
 Maynard, Charlie  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorris, Anna  
 McNally, Frank  
 McNeill, Kirsty  
 Medi, Llinos  
 van Mierlo, Freddie  
 Miller, Calum  
 Milne, John  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Mohamed, Iqbal



Moon, Perran  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Helen  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe  
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)  
 Mullane, Margaret  
 Murphy, Luke  
 Murray, Chris  
 Murray, James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Murray, Susan  
 Myer, Luke  
 Naish, James  
 Nandy, rh Lisa  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Alex  
 Olney, Sarah  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 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  
 Phillipson, rh Bridget  
 Pinkerton, Dr Al  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Powell, Joe  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Race, Steve  
 Ramsay, Adrian  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reed, rh Steve  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reeves, rh Rachel  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Richards, Jake  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rigby, Lucy  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim

Rodda, Matt  
 Roome, Ian  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Mrs Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sabine, Anna  
 Sackman, Sarah  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
 Sowards, Mr Mark  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Simons, Josh  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smart, Lisa  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Sarah  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Streeting, rh Wes  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Sullivan, Kirsteen  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Swann, Robin  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, Alison  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Luke  
 Thomas, Cameron  
 Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turley, Anna  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Karl  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Walker, Imogen  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Welsh, Michelle  
 West, Catherine

Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 White, Katie  
 Wilkinson, Max  
 Williams, David  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Woodcock, Sean  
  
 Allister, Jim  
 Anderson, Lee  
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Andrew, rh Stuart  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi  
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
 Barclay, rh Steve  
 Bedford, Mr Peter  
 Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Bool, Sarah  
 Bowie, Andrew  
 Braverman, rh Suella  
 Campbell, Mr Gregory  
 Cartlidge, James  
 Chope, Sir Christopher  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Cocking, Lewis  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davis, rh David  
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Farage, Nigel  
 Fortune, Peter  
 Fox, Sir Ashley  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Freeman, George  
 Gale, rh Sir Roger  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Glen, rh John  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Griffiths, Alison  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Holden, rh Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Holmes, Paul

Wrighting, Rosie  
 Wrigley, Martin  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Young, Claire  
 Zeichner, Daniel

## NOES

Hunt, rh Jeremy  
 Jopp, Lincoln  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lam, Katie  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Lockhart, Carla  
 Lopez, Julia  
 Lowe, Rupert  
 Mak, Alan  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 McMurdock, James  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Rankin, Jack  
 Reed, David  
 Robertson, Joe  
 Robinson, rh Gavin  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Simmonds, David  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, rh Sir Julian  
 Snowden, Mr Andrew  
 Stafford, Gregory  
 Stephenson, Blake  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Thomas, Bradley  
 Tice, Richard  
 Timothy, Nick  
 Wild, James  
 Wilson, rh Sammy  
 Wood, Mike

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

That the draft Official Controls (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 19 November 2024, be approved.

*The House divided: Ayes 423, Noes 77.*

## Division No. 81]

## AYES

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

Ali, Rushanara  
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
 Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Anderson, Callum  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Antoniazzi, Tonia  
 Aquarone, Steff  
 Arthur, Dr Scott  
 Asato, Jess  
 Asser, James  
 Athwal, Jas

Atkinson, Lewis  
 Babarinde, Josh  
 Bailey, Mr Calvin  
 Bailey, Olivia  
 Baines, David  
 Baker, Richard  
 Bance, Antonia  
 Barker, Paula  
 Barron, Lee  
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
 Baxter, Johanna  
 Beales, Danny  
 Beavers, Lorraine  
 Begum, Apsana  
 Bell, Torsten  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Bennett, Alison  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Billington, Ms Polly  
 Bishop, Matt  
 Blackman, Kirsty  
 Blake, Olivia  
 Blake, Rachel  
 Bloore, Chris  
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan  
 Brewer, Alex  
 Brown-Fuller, Jess  
 Bryant, Chris  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burke, Maureen  
 Burton-Sampson, David  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, Ian  
 Cadbury, Ruth  
 Caliskan, Nesil  
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
 Campbell, Irene  
 Campbell, Juliet  
 Campbell-Savours, Markus  
 Cane, Charlotte  
 Carling, Sam  
 Chadwick, David  
 Chamberlain, Wendy  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Charters, Mr Luke  
 Chowns, Ellie  
 Clark, Feryal  
 Coleman, Ben  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy  
 Cooper, Daisy  
 Cooper, rh Yvette  
 Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creagh, Mary  
 Creasy, Ms Stella  
 Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris  
 Daby, Janet

Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Dance, Adam  
 Darling, Steve  
 Darlington, Emily  
 Davey, rh Ed  
 Davies, Ann  
 Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 De Cordova, Marsha  
 Dean, Bobby  
 Dean, Josh  
 Dearden, Kate  
 Denyer, Carla  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dillon, Mr Lee  
 Dixon, Anna  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Doogan, Dave  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Downie, Graeme  
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Eastwood, Colum  
 Eccles, Cat  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Efford, Clive  
 Egan, Damien  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Entwistle, Kirth  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Esterson, Bill  
 Evans, Chris  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Farron, Tim  
 Ferguson, Mark  
 Ferguson, Patricia  
 Fleet, Natalie  
 Flynn, rh Stephen  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Forster, Mr Will  
 Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Franklin, Zöe  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Furniss, Gill  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gardner, Dr Allison  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 George, Andrew  
 German, Gill  
 Gethins, Stephen  
 Gilbert, Tracy  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gilmour, Rachel  
 Gittins, Becky  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Glover, Olly  
 Goldman, Marie  
 Goldsborough, Ben  
 Gordon, Tom  
 Gould, Georgia  
 Grady, John  
 Green, Sarah

Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Gwynne, Andrew  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Haigh, rh Louise  
 Hall, Sarah  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hanna, Claire  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Harris, Carolyn  
 Hatton, Lloyd  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Healey, rh John  
 Heylings, Pippa  
 Hillier, Dame Meg  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Hobhouse, Wera  
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire  
 Hume, Alison  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Ingham, Leigh  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Jogee, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Jones, Clive  
 Jones, rh Darren  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Louise  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Josan, Gurinder Singh  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kane, Chris  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Kendall, rh Liz  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Khan, Ayoub  
 Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kohler, Mr Paul  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kumaran, Uma  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lamb, Peter  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Law, Noah  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leadbitter, Graham  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Lightwood, Simon  
 Logan, Seamus  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 MacCleary, James  
 Macdonald, Alice  
 MacNae, Andy

Madders, Justin  
 Maguire, Ben  
 Mahmood, rh Shabana  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Martin, Amanda  
 Martin, Mike  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mather, Keir  
 Mathew, Brian  
 Mayer, Alex  
 Maynard, Charlie  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McKinnell, Catherine  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorris, Anna  
 McNally, Frank  
 McNeill, Kirsty  
 Medi, Llinos  
 van Mierlo, Freddie  
 Miller, Calum  
 Milne, John  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 Mohamed, Iqbal  
 Moon, Perran  
 Moran, Layla  
 Morden, Jessica  
 Morgan, Helen  
 Morgan, Stephen  
 Morris, Grahame  
 Morris, Joe  
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)  
 Mullane, Margaret  
 Murphy, Luke  
 Murray, Chris  
 Murray, James  
 Murray, Katrina  
 Murray, Susan  
 Myer, Luke  
 Naish, James  
 Nandy, rh Lisa  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Alex  
 O'Hara, Brendan  
 Olney, Sarah  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Opher, Dr Simon  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 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  
 Phillipson, rh Bridget  
 Pinkerton, Dr Al  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Powell, Joe  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Race, Steve  
 Ramsay, Adrian  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Rayner, rh Angela  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reed, rh Steve  
 Reeves, Ellie  
 Reeves, rh Rachel  
 Reid, Joani  
 Reynolds, Emma  
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Richards, Jake  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rigby, Lucy  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Roome, Ian  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Mrs Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sabine, Anna  
 Sackman, Sarah  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
 Sewards, Mr Mark  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Simons, Josh  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smart, Lisa  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Sarah  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo

Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Streeting, rh Wes  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Sullivan, Kirsteen  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, Alison  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Luke  
 Thomas, Cameron  
 Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turley, Anna  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Karl  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Walker, Imogen  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Welsh, Michelle  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 White, Katie  
 Wilkinson, Max  
 Williams, David  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Woodcock, Sean  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Wrigley, Martin  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Young, Claire  
 Zeichner, Daniel

### NOES

Allister, Jim  
 Anderson, Lee  
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Andrew, rh Stuart  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi  
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
 Barclay, rh Steve  
 Bedford, Mr Peter

Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Bool, Sarah  
 Bowie, Andrew  
 Braverman, rh Suella  
 Campbell, Mr Gregory  
 Cartlidge, James  
 Chope, Sir Christopher  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Cocking, Lewis

Costa, Alberto  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davis, rh David  
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Farage, Nigel  
 Fortune, Peter  
 Fox, Sir Ashley  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Freeman, George  
 Gale, rh Sir Roger  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Glen, rh John  
 Griffith, Andrew  
 Griffiths, Alison  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Holden, rh Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Hunt, rh Jeremy  
 Jopp, Lincoln  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lam, Katie  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Lockhart, Carla  
 Lopez, Julia  
 Lowe, Rupert

Mak, Alan  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 McMurdock, James  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Rankin, Jack  
 Reed, David  
 Robertson, Joe  
 Robinson, rh Gavin  
 Rosindell, Andrew  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Simmonds, David  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, rh Sir Julian  
 Snowden, Mr Andrew  
 Stafford, Gregory  
 Stephenson, Blake  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Swann, Robin  
 Thomas, Bradley  
 Tice, Richard  
 Timothy, Nick  
 Wilson, rh Sammy  
 Wood, Mike

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

### ENERGY

That the draft Clean Heat Market Mechanism Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 21 November 2024, be approved.

*The House divided: Ayes 424, Noes 109.*

### Division No. 82]

### AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)  
 Abbott, Jack  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Adam, Shockat  
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
 Akehurst, Luke  
 Alaba, Mr Bayo  
 Aldridge, Dan  
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas  
 Al-Hassan, Sadik  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
 Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Anderson, Callum  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Antoniazzi, Tonia  
 Aquarone, Steff  
 Arthur, Dr Scott  
 Asato, Jess  
 Asser, James  
 Athwal, Jas  
 Atkinson, Lewis  
 Babarinde, Josh  
 Bailey, Mr Calvin  
 Bailey, Olivia  
 Baines, David  
 Baker, Richard  
 Bance, Antonia  
 Barker, Paula

Barron, Lee  
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
 Baxter, Johanna  
 Beales, Danny  
 Beavers, Lorraine  
 Begum, Apsana  
 Bell, Torsten  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Bennett, Alison  
 Betts, Mr Clive  
 Billington, Ms Polly  
 Bishop, Matt  
 Blackman, Kirsty  
 Blake, Olivia  
 Blake, Rachel  
 Bloore, Chris  
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan  
 Brewer, Alex  
 Brown-Fuller, Jess  
 Bryant, Chris  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burke, Maureen  
 Burton-Sampson, David  
 Butler, Dawn  
 Byrne, Ian  
 Cadbury, Ruth



Caliskan, Nesil	Farron, Tim	Joseph, Sojan	Mullane, Margaret
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Ferguson, Mark	Juss, Warinder	Murphy, Luke
Campbell, Irene	Ferguson, Patricia	Kane, Chris	Murray, Chris
Campbell, Juliet	Fleet, Natalie	Kaur, Satvir ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i> )	Murray, James
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Flynn, rh Stephen	Kendall, rh Liz	Murray, Katrina
Cane, Charlotte	Foody, Emma	Khan, Afzal	Murray, Susan
Carling, Sam	Fookes, Catherine	Khan, Ayoub	Myer, Luke
Chadwick, David	Forster, Mr Will	Khan, Naushabah	Naish, James
Chamberlain, Wendy	Foster, Mr Paul	Kinnock, Stephen	Nandy, rh Lisa
Champion, Sarah	Foxcroft, Vicky	Kirkham, Jayne	Narayan, Kanishka
Charalambous, Bambos	Francis, Daniel	Kitchen, Gen	Newbury, Josh
Charters, Mr Luke	Franklin, Zöe	Kohler, Mr Paul	Niblett, Samantha
Chowns, Ellie	Frith, Mr James	Kumar, Sonia	Nichols, Charlotte
Clark, Feryal	Furniss, Gill	Kumaran, Uma	Norris, Alex
Coleman, Ben	Gardiner, Barry	Kyle, rh Peter	O'Hara, Brendan
Collinge, Lizzi	Gardner, Dr Allison	Kyrke-Smith, Laura	Olney, Sarah
Collins, Tom	Gelderd, Anna	Lamb, Peter	Onn, Melanie
Conlon, Liam	Gemmell, Alan	Lavery, Ian	Onwurah, Chi
Coombes, Sarah	George, Andrew	Law, Noah	Opher, Dr Simon
Cooper, Andrew	German, Gill	Leadbeater, Kim	Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Gethins, Stephen	Leadbitter, Graham	Osamor, Kate
Cooper, Daisy	Gill, Preet Kaur	Leishman, Brian	Osborne, Kate
Cooper, rh Yvette	Gilmour, Rachel	Lewin, Andrew	Osborne, Tristan
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Gittins, Becky	Lewis, Clive	Owatemi, Taiwo
Costigan, Deirdre	Glendon, Mary	Lightwood, Simon	Owen, Sarah
Cox, Pam	Glover, Olly	Logan, Seamus	Paffey, Darren
Coyle, Neil	Goldman, Marie	Long Bailey, Rebecca	Pakes, Andrew
Craft, Jen	Goldsborough, Ben	MacAlister, Josh	Patrick, Matthew
Creagh, Mary	Gordon, Tom	MacCleary, James	Payne, Michael
Creasy, Ms Stella	Gould, Georgia	Macdonald, Alice	Peacock, Stephanie
Crichton, Torcuil	Grady, John	MacNae, Andy	Pearce, Jon
Curtis, Chris	Green, Sarah	Madders, Justin	Pennycook, Matthew
Daby, Janet	Griffith, Dame Nia	Maguire, Ben	Perkins, Mr Toby
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Gwynne, Andrew	Mahmood, rh Shabana	Perteghella, Manuela
Dalton, Ashley	Hack, Amanda	Malhotra, Seema	Phillipson, rh Bridget
Dance, Adam	Haigh, rh Louise	Martin, Amanda	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Darling, Steve	Hall, Sarah	Martin, Mike	Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Darlington, Emily	Hamilton, Fabian	Maskell, Rachael	Pitcher, Lee
Davey, rh Ed	Hamilton, Paulette	Mather, Keir	Powell, Joe
Davies, Ann	Hanna, Claire	Mathew, Brian	Powell, rh Lucy
Davies, Jonathan	Hardy, Emma	Mayer, Alex	Poynton, Gregor
Davies, Paul	Harris, Carolyn	Maynard, Charlie	Prinsley, Peter
De Cordova, Marsha	Hatton, Lloyd	McAllister, Douglas	Quigley, Mr Richard
Dean, Bobby	Hayes, Helen	McCluskey, Martin	Qureshi, Yasmin
Dean, Josh	Hayes, Tom	McDonald, Andy	Race, Steve
Dearden, Kate	Hazelgrove, Claire	McDonald, Chris	Ramsay, Adrian
Denyer, Carla	Healey, rh John	McDonnell, rh John	Rand, Mr Connor
Dickson, Jim	Heylings, Pippa	McEvoy, Lola	Ranger, Andrew
Dillon, Mr Lee	Hillier, Dame Meg	McKee, Gordon	Rayner, rh Angela
Dixon, Anna	Hinchliff, Chris	McKenna, Kevin	Reader, Mike
Dixon, Samantha	Hinder, Jonathan	McKinnell, Catherine	Reed, rh Steve
Dodds, rh Anneliese	Hobhouse, Wera	McMahon, Jim	Reeves, Ellie
Dollimore, Helena	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	McMorrin, Anna	Reeves, rh Rachel
Doogan, Dave	Hopkins, Rachel	McNally, Frank	Reid, Joani
Doughty, Stephen	Hughes, Claire	McNeill, Kirsty	Reynolds, Emma
Dowd, Peter	Hume, Alison	Medi, Llinos	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Downie, Graeme	Huq, Dr Rupa	van Mierlo, Freddie	Rhodes, Martin
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Hurley, Patrick	Miller, Calum	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Eagle, Dame Angela	Ingham, Leigh	Milne, John	Richards, Jake
Eagle, rh Maria	Irons, Natasha	Minns, Ms Julie	Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Eastwood, Colum	Jameson, Sally	Mishra, Navendu	Rigby, Lucy
Eccles, Cat	Jarvis, Dan	Mohamed, Iqbal	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Edwards, Lauren	Jogee, Adam	Moon, Perran	Robertson, Dave
Efford, Clive	Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Moran, Layla	Roca, Tim
Egan, Damien	Jones, Clive	Morden, Jessica	Rodda, Matt
Elmore, Chris	Jones, rh Darren	Morgan, Helen	Roome, Ian
Entwistle, Kirith	Jones, Gerald	Morgan, Stephen	Rushworth, Sam
Eshalomi, Florence	Jones, Lillian	Morris, Grahame	Russell, Mrs Sarah
Esterson, Bill	Jones, Louise	Morris, Joe	Rutland, Tom
Evans, Chris	Jones, Ruth	Morrison, Mr Tom ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster</i> )	Ryan, Oliver
Falconer, Mr Hamish	Josan, Gurinder Singh		Sabine, Anna
Farnsworth, Linsey			Sackman, Sarah

Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
 Sewards, Mr Mark  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Simons, Josh  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smart, Lisa  
 Smith, Cat  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Sarah  
 Smyth, Karin  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Sobel, Alex  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Streeting, rh Wes  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Sullivan, Kirsteen  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Swann, Robin  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, Alison  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Luke  
 Thomas, Cameron  
 Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote  
 cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Thomas, Gareth  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie

Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Tomlinson, Dan  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turley, Anna  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Karl  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vaz, rh Valerie  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Walker, Imogen  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Welsh, Michelle  
 West, Catherine  
 Western, Andrew  
 Western, Matt  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 White, Katie  
 Wilkinson, Max  
 Williams, David  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Woodcock, Sean  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Wrigley, Martin  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Young, Claire  
 Zeichner, Daniel

#### NOES

Allister, Jim  
 Anderson, Lee  
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote  
 cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Andrew, rh Stuart  
 Argar, rh Edward  
 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  
 Braverman, rh Suella  
 Campbell, Mr Gregory  
 Cartledge, James  
 Chope, Sir Christopher  
 Cleverly, rh Mr James  
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey  
 Cocking, Lewis  
 Cooper, John  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Cross, Harriet  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Mims  
 Davis, rh David  
 Dewhurst, Charlie  
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline  
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Farage, Nigel  
 Fortune, Peter  
 Fox, Sir Ashley  
 Francois, rh Mr Mark  
 Freeman, George  
 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  
 Holden, rh Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hunt, rh Jeremy  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Jopp, Lincoln  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lam, Katie  
 Lamont, John  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward

Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Lockhart, Carla  
 Lopez, Julia  
 Lowe, Rupert  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Mayhew, Jerome  
 McMurdock, James  
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Mundell, rh David  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Norman, rh Jesse  
 Obese-Jecty, Ben  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Paul, Rebecca  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Pritchard, rh Mark  
 Rankin, Jack  
 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  
 Stafford, Gregory  
 Stephenson, Blake  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Stuart, rh Graham  
 Thomas, Bradley  
 Tice, Richard  
 Timothy, Nick  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wild, James  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wilson, rh Sammy  
 Wood, Mike  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

# Westminster Hall

*Wednesday 15 January 2025*

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

## Rivers, Lakes and Seas: Water Quality

9.30 am

**Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered water quality in rivers, lakes and seas.

Bore da—good morning. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I grew up in the countryside on a farm, and one of my favourite memories was having a friend round, going for a walk and splashing through the streams at the bottom of the garden. We took it for granted that we could mess about in the Dorset chalk streams, and apart from annoying my mum when I came back inside sopping wet, making a terrible mess, there was never any fear that I would get sick or that I would be wading through sewage. What a change there has been, with parents now too scared to let their children run helter-skelter into the local stream, river or lake, for fear that they will get an ear infection, an eye infection or a stomach infection, or encounter a wet wipe or something much worse.

I moved to Monmouthshire 25 years ago, and it was fantastic to raise my children there, with its fantastic rivers including the Wye, the Usk, the Monnow and lots of smaller rivers criss-crossing the constituency. I have spent so many happy hours, as I am sure other Members have in their local rivers, swimming in the Usk, walking by the Wye and kayaking down it. I have seen kingfishers and heron there and introduced my kids to the amazing wildlife we have, and I have spent some of our happiest days there as a family.

Sadly, the health of our two major rivers, the Wye and the Usk, is in serious decline, and they are really good examples of what is happening elsewhere in the UK. In February 2022, Natural Resources Wales research showed that the Usk had the highest incidence of phosphate pollution of the nine Welsh special areas of conservation, or SACs, designated for rivers. In Glascoed near Usk, there was an average 85% failure rate against phosphate targets between January 2023 and June 2024.

The Wye is being impacted by high levels of phosphates, which are causing a decline in water quality and algal blooms that then starve the fish, plants and invertebrates of oxygen. That leads to biodiversity loss and the collapse of the whole web of life in the river. These algal blooms are growing larger and becoming more frequent. In 2020, a thick algal bloom extended for more than 140 miles of the river. Recovery will take decades.

Natural England's condition assessment for the Wye SAC in 2023 was "unfavourable-declining", which was based on declines in Atlantic salmon, water quality and white-clawed crayfish in the Lugg, and aquatic plants, Atlantic salmon and white-clawed crayfish in the Wye.

**Jesse Norman** (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate on an immensely important topic, and I am

grateful to you, Mr Dowd, for allowing a quick intervention from a shadow Front Bencher on a matter of great constituency interest. She will be aware that I and others have tried to fight this battle for at least four years. Will she support my request that the Government look again at the plan for the River Wye and, even if they do not adopt the detail of it, at least preserve the £35 million of funding pledged by the previous Government, or something close to it, to support the restoration of the river?

**Catherine Fookes:** I salute some of the work that the right hon. Gentleman has tried to do locally on the Wye in Herefordshire, even though he is an Opposition Member, but with all due respect, the River Wye action plan was roundly discounted and felt to be not worth the paper it was written on by the non-governmental organisations in the area at the time. The Government failed to consult Wales, and the plan seemed to be rushed out before the general election. When the Minister looked at it, she found that that money was not allocated and available to push out and support the Wye. I am sure she will say later that we have had a meeting with the Wye Catchment Partnership, and that we are working in partnership with the Welsh Government to push forward a plan that has been developed by the Wye Catchment Partnership. I will give some more detail about that in a moment.

Unfortunately, after 14 years of Conservative failure, we have record levels of illegal sewage dumping in our rivers, lakes and seas. I will talk much more about rivers today, because that is what I have in my constituency, but our lakes, seas and coastal towns are also deeply affected.

Chronic ongoing diffuse pollution from agriculture also affects our water quality. In England, only 16% of all assessed surface waters achieved good ecological status, and less than 1% achieved high status. The decline in our water health is staggering, and we desperately need to take action to repair it. As I know hon. Members will agree, there are amazing NGOs, campaigning groups and citizen scientists in every one of our constituencies who have brought this matter to our attention and to the fore nationally. I pay tribute to all of them, especially those in Monmouthshire.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She is talking about those who are contributing to the debate and trying to do their best, but does she agree that it should not be left to people such as one-time musical celebrity Feargal Sharkey, from my city of Londonderry, and many others to campaign on these issues? We need Government action rather than pressure groups and people trying to campaign for change.

**Catherine Fookes:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I thank him for his intervention. That is exactly why the Government are taking action. I will come on to what the Labour Government are doing shortly. I was fortunate to meet Feargal Sharkey on the campaign trail. He endorsed my campaign, which means that I will be held to account. That is one of the reasons why this issue is so important to me and why I am pleased to have secured this debate.



[*Catherine Fookes*]

I believe that the campaigning groups in Monmouthshire are some of the best in the UK. We have Save the River Usk, led by the inspiring Angela Jones, Friends of the River Wye, Save the Wye, the South East Wales Rivers Trust, the Wye & Usk Foundation and many more, and they continue to do excellent work to hold us to account.

We also have the Wye Catchment Partnership, which is a cross-border partnership of more than 70 members, including Natural Resources Wales and the Environment Agency and representatives of all the local authorities, the National Farmers Union and the environmental charities I have mentioned. It is a great partnership. As I have mentioned, the Minister recently had a meeting with the Wye Catchment Partnership to hear about the need for an action plan. I sincerely thank her for her engagement to get the Wye catchment plan phase 2 off the ground. That could be a brilliant pilot project, supported by Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and consistent with the unfulfilled policy commitments of the previous Government's plan for water. It shows how working with stakeholders across all counties and countries, and the regulators, could be a model for changing the face of our rivers. I hope the Government will support it.

Rivers know no boundaries. The Wye crosses four counties and two countries, so we need an integrated and coherent Wye catchment management plan that uses the best available evidence and a well-targeted programme of remedial measures to get our river cleaned up.

I said that Feargal Sharkey endorsed my election campaign, a key promise of which was to work in this place to clean up our rivers. That is why I am pleased that the Labour Government have done more on water in six months than the Tories and their coalition partners, the Lib Dems, did in 14 years. I am proud of the two main measures that the Government have already announced: the Water (Special Measures) Bill—I am proud to be a member of the Public Bill Committee—and the water commission. The Bill will enable the Government and regulators to block the payment of bonuses to water company executives, bring criminal charges against those who break the law, issue automatic and severe fines, and monitor every sewage outlet.

It is right that the Government have started work on cleaning up our water by tackling our water companies, which the Conservatives failed to do for 14 years, but the next big issue that we must tackle is the pollution in our waterways arising from diffuse agricultural sources. As the water commission's remit is to look at how to tackle inherited systemic issues in the water sector to restore our rivers, lakes and seas to good health, I am sure the chair, the former deputy governor of the Bank of England Sir Jon Cunliffe, will include diffuse pollution from agriculture in his commission's investigations.

**Ms Polly Billington** (East Thanet) (Lab): I am keen to make sure that the water commission can tackle some of the most egregious failures of the water industry. For example, yesterday Southern Water dumped sewage into the sea alongside Ramsgate. This issue is fundamental to the environment and the economy in a seaside community such as Thanet, and it needs to be part of our overall

drive for growth. The new independent water commission needs to explore different governance models and introduce local accountability, or the water companies will continue to fail as they have done up until now.

**Catherine Fookes:** I agree entirely. The Government's mission is growth. We need to see the cleaning-up of our waterways as an integral part of our growth mission.

We know that tackling diffuse pollution from agriculture will be a hard nut to crack, with farmers already under pressure, but we have examples of good practice in the Wye. For example, Avara is already shipping out 75% of the chicken waste from its Herefordshire chicken farms along the Wye. That is to be welcomed, but it does not solve the long-term problems of too much phosphate in our rivers.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. I represent Glastonbury and Somerton, and a large part of the Somerset levels and moors is in my constituency. Somerset is always at the forefront of flooding, and many of my farmers are always battling flooding. Grants such as the slurry infrastructure grant helped my livestock farmers ensure that nutrients such as phosphates do not enter the watercourses. That improves the viability of our farms, the health of our soil and the cleanliness of our rivers. Does the hon. Member agree that it was wrong for DEFRA to pause access to those grants?

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Order. Lots of Members wish to speak today, so we could end up with a two-minute limit on speeches. I ask Members to keep their interventions very short, otherwise the limit will go down to one and a half minutes and then down to one minute.

**Catherine Fookes:** Thank you, Mr Dowd. To continue with diffuse pollution, Lancaster University estimates that around 83% of phosphates in the Wye come from diffuse agricultural sources, and only 15% or so from Dŵr Cymru—Welsh Water—assets. Indeed, Dŵr Cymru's £80 million investment in AMP 7—an AMP is an asset management period, or the investment round that is done in five-year cycles—and the planned £150 million investment in AMP 8 will eliminate 100% of its fair share of phosphates in the Wye catchment by 2032. By 2030, over 90% of the phosphate load will be from diffuse agricultural sources. It is not sewage that is our main problem here.

I know this will be a hard conversation with farmers, but we need to start having it. We need to incentivise the right fertiliser applications and the right stocking rates in our river catchments on both sides of the border in order to ensure we remove the annual accrual and legacy surplus of excess phosphates and restore our rivers back to full health. Business as usual will not work.

Also, we need better enforcement of existing regulations by both the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales. The RePhoKUs project—the role of phosphorus in the resilience and sustainability of the UK food system—at Lancaster University, which re-focuses phosphorus use in the UK food system, estimates that phosphorus leakage from land to water also causes widespread and costly pollution worth £39.5 billion to the UK economy—a huge external cost that we must try to avoid.

In summary, we have been left a very difficult legacy due to inaction by the Tories. It will take much work by the Government to clear up the mess and the water quality in our rivers, lakes and seas to fix this broken system. I am confident that, by working cross-border and in partnership with all those involved, as the current Government are doing, we can clean up our water once and for all, as the Wye catchment partnership aims to do.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Order. I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate—although you can sit down for the minute. As I said earlier, because of the number of Members who have indicated that they wish to speak, I am imposing a two-and-a-half minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches, with the authority of the Chairman of Ways and Means, to take effect right away. Bear that in mind with interventions, as I am sure you all appreciate.

9.45 am

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

I want to bring attention to Lough Neagh in the middle of Northern Ireland, which is the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles, spanning approximately 149 square miles. It serves as a vital resource, supplying 40% of Northern Ireland's drinking water, but in the last two summers of '23 and '24 Lough Neagh has experienced severe cyanobacteria blooms, which have been visible from space. Those blooms pose a risk to wildlife and human health, due to the toxins they produce.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland has instigated 20 key measures, but we must wait for the summer to see whether they will be enough. They include enhancing monitoring and research, and other agricultural interventions. As the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) said in respect of past processes, to tackle the challenges that agriculture faces with water quality, we need to work in partnership with farmers, and look to go back to allowing farmers to farm by the seasonal calendar, rather than a paper one that has seen farming practices put out of kilter with the seasons we now see.

The Northern Ireland water-quality framework is different from other parts of the UK. Northern Ireland is guided by national and European directives, including the water framework directive, which aims for all water bodies to achieve good ecological status, whatever the standards or the regulations. A 2024 report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office noted that the existing regulatory and policy frameworks have failed to adequately protect water quality in Lough Neagh.

Northern Ireland Water, the sole provider of water and sewerage services in the region, operates under the governance of the Department for Infrastructure and our Utility Regulator. That is why I asked, in a debate in the Chamber, that Northern Ireland Water be brought under the Government's independent commission, which is being led by Sir Jon Cunliffe. I have been informed by the Government that that is currently restricted to England and Wales, but I think there would be a benefit if Northern Ireland was included.

9.48 am

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for bringing forward this important debate.

In December, the Environment Agency rehomed thousands of fish into the River Cut at Jock's Lane in Bracknell. That stocking will provide an immediate boost to fish numbers, which will be multiplied many times when the arrivals settle into their new homes and begin to spawn. In recent years, Jock's Lane has been better known as a sewage spot than an angler's paradise, so this intervention is welcome. The question now is how best to protect these latest Bracknell residents from any further sewage leakage.

In 2023, Thames Water dumped more than 1,000 hours of raw and partially treated sewage into Bracknell and Sandhurst rivers. In Bracknell that was into the River Cut and in Sandhurst it was into the River Blackwater. It is not only deeply damaging to nature; it is frankly disgusting. A decade of under-investment by water companies and a lack of oversight from successive Tory Governments have led us to this.

**Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): In 2023, Chichester suffered 990 sewage spills in our rivers and harbour, lasting more than 17,000 hours. Does the hon. Member agree that, after a decade of Tory inaction, the Water (Special Measures) Bill is welcome, but it could go further on regulation, especially by giving Ofwat teeth?

**Peter Swallow:** I will come to just that point shortly.

The rain we saw earlier this month is another reminder of the problems we are facing. It led to another bout of sewage dumping in my constituency, including from the recently upgraded Ascot sewage works, which I visited back in December. Since 2020, executives of the water companies overseeing these incidents have been paid £41 million in bonuses and benefits, and it is reported that over the last two years water companies have paid out more than £2.5 billion in dividends. Meanwhile, the current maximum fixed penalty notice—the monetary penalty—that regulators can impose on water companies for the majority of water sector offences is £300. It is little surprise, then, that a recent survey by Ofwat showed that only a quarter of customers see companies as acting in the interests of the people and the environment.

During the general election, I campaigned on the promise that Labour would get tough on water companies and cut down on the horrific pollution they are causing. I promised that a Labour Government would put failing water companies under special measures, blocking bonuses for executives who pollute our waterways, bringing criminal charges against persistent lawbreakers, enabling automatic and severe fines for wrongdoing, and ensuring the monitoring of every sewage outlet. For that reason, I am delighted the Government have brought forward their Water (Special Measures) Bill, and I am proud to have supported it on Second Reading.

I used to be a teacher, so I know what marking your own homework looks like. The requirement for water companies to publish information on discharges from emergency overflows in near-real time will create unprecedented levels of transparency, giving regulators and the public regular insight into the around-the-clock

[Peter Swallow]

operations of water companies. Meanwhile, making it a statutory requirement for water companies in England to publish annual pollution incident reduction plans will force water companies to set out clear, transparent actions. I would welcome clarity from the Minister on whether that monitoring will be truly independent. How much of a role will Ofwat or other relevant bodies have in producing, monitoring and assurance-testing the production of the data?

9.52 am

**Cameron Thomas** (Tewkesbury) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd.

Tewkesbury is characterised by its waterways, and most commonly known for its propensity to flood. It floods because, from north to south, the western boundary is the River Severn, and the River Avon also flows into Tewkesbury town. Tributary waterways course across the constituency. I will return to flooding shortly.

According to *The Guardian*, among other sources, the River Avon is one of the worst-polluted rivers in England. There were 6,573 sewage spills in 2023, registering the River Avon as the third most-polluted river in England. In the same year, sewage was released into the River Severn for more than 30,000 hours across 3,057 spills, registering the Severn as another of the worst-polluted in England and Wales.

Since the general election, I have been working with Tewkesbury Friends of the Earth and Safe Avon, two dedicated groups of local environmental campaigners. In November 2024, I joined both groups at the Abbey mill in Tewkesbury to draw water samples from the River Avon. The samples we recovered tested consistently with the findings they have been recording since June 2023: they contained very high nitrate pollution and high phosphate pollution. Such levels of those pollutants stimulate algae growth, which absorbs the oxygen in the water and suffocates wildlife.

The pollution levels are also dangerous to people. Please take a moment to consider what it is like for thousands of my residents whose kitchens, dining rooms and living rooms are swamped with this filth on an annual basis. Severn Trent Water's chief executive officer was paid £3.2 million last year, while my residents' water bills are due to rise by 40%. To add insult to injury, the Environment Agency awarded Severn Trent its highest grade for environmental performance. That, in and of itself, is a scandal.

The Liberal Democrats want to stop overseas shareholders drawing money out of private water companies that are already struggling to stay solvent. Rather than nationalise these companies, we want to see them turned into public benefit companies. I call on the Government to prevent CEOs from drawing huge bonuses while this scandal continues, and to fine them according to the mass of sewage discharged.

9.54 am

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

Hidden River Cabins is a wonderful local business in my constituency that offers secluded wooden cabins, tucked away in the beautiful Cumbrian countryside to the north of Carlisle. It is, quite frankly, a breathtaking

place. As well as providing the perfect spot to unwind and relax, it has become hugely popular as a wedding venue. Part of its charm is the River Lyne, which runs nearby. I suspect that many newlyweds have taken a late-night dip in its lovely waters; I myself have swum near the cabins and can testify to the river's restorative effect.

Fortunately for locals and visitors, that stretch of the Lyne is one of the few places in my constituency where it is relatively safe to swim. That is not the case elsewhere in Carlisle and north Cumbria. In total, some 40 sites across my constituency were polluted in 2023, and it is fair to say that few people would look to start a cosy cabin business beside a sewage spot. That draws attention to another of the pernicious problems caused by pollution that the last Government allowed to flow unchecked under their watch.

Sewage, of course, poses health risks to users of our waterways, and to the wildlife and plant life that relies on those waterways, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) mentioned, there is also an economic cost. When our rivers are clean, people will want to visit them and spend time there, and entrepreneurs will want to start businesses, creating jobs and boosting local economies. We are blessed with many beautiful rivers, lakes and seas in this country. Each of them could be lined with flourishing businesses; instead, they are off limits, their utility reduced to just how much sewage they can accommodate.

Thankfully, our Government are getting on with tackling the issue. The Water (Special Measures) Bill, which the Minister is currently piloting with such passion and grace, will give us increased powers to hold rogue actors to account. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for securing the debate; I share her hope that our rivers will soon be places where everyone can enjoy themselves.

9.57 am

**David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for securing the debate. Like her, I am privileged to represent a constituency that is home to some of the UK's most powerful rivers, including the Rivers Wye, Usk and Towy. However, these national treasures are drowning under a barrage of pollution.

The Wye, Usk and Towy are heavily polluted, harming the environment and local wildlife, and jeopardising industries such as tourism, leisure and angling. I fully support the concerns raised about the previous Conservative Government's failure to tackle water pollution. Conservative neglect allowed water companies to pollute rivers with impunity while siphoning off profits to pay excessive bonuses and dividends. People want swift action now.

As the hon. Member for Monmouthshire mentioned, the previous Government had several roundtables on how to clean up the Wye, but what happened? Very little. The impact of the inability to clean up our rivers is hurting local communities in my constituency. We know there is a housing crisis, caused by a shortage of affordable homes. In Talgarth, a moratorium on new homes has been in place since 2022, meaning several much-needed housing schemes are frozen. Oversight from the Welsh Labour Government has fallen short.



Although it is a non-profit organisation, for years Dŵr Cymru failed to invest in infrastructure and still diverted funds into executive pay, and it is one of the worst offenders on sewage dumping. There is widespread agreement that stronger regulations on water pollution are needed, a stance that I support fully, but regulations are effective only if they are enforced. In Wales, enforcement is severely lacking. Natural Resources Wales, our environmental regulator, has faced a decade of cuts under the Welsh Government, and is currently operating at least 50 staff members short of the number needed to do the job effectively.

9.59 am

**Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) on securing and ably leading this important debate.

The health of our seas and waterways is a pressing issue that affects each of us, and we have a collective responsibility to tackle this issue. Waterways are incredibly important to the soul of Mid Cheshire. My constituency is intersected and surrounded by waterways, including four rivers, three canals and a smorgasbord of meres and flashes—a legacy of our history of salt extraction. Indeed, Northwich played a particularly important role in the development of the inland waterways in Britain. At one time, Lawrence of Arabia was based there to oversee the spy ships that we built. Of course, Mid Cheshire's waterways are not as important as they once were for powering our industry, but they remain vital ecosystems that support a rich tapestry of life, contribute to our economy and provide us with recreation and essential resources.

A consistent theme of this debate has been the alarming frequency of sewage discharges. For the sake of brevity, I will spare Members the statistics, but they represent the chronic under-investment in our sewerage infrastructure over a sustained period. That is a feature, not a bug, of how the water industry has been set up. If that was not evidence enough, we have only to look at the last two floods of Northwich town centre, which were caused not by the river's flood defences overtopping, but by insufficient capacity in our drains to deal with the volume of water.

As stewards of our environment, we have a responsibility to act and it is good that the Government is doing that, not only through the Water (Special Measures) Bill, but through the independent commission on the water sector regulatory system. We must continue to advocate for the transformation of how the water industry is run, and seek to speed up the delivery of upgrades to our sewage infrastructure to clean up our waterways for good.

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): The River Mole flows through my constituency. In 2024, it suffered over 2,000 additional hours of sewage discharge in comparison with 2023, despite similar rainfall. Does the hon. Member agree that despite recent efforts to protect our waterways—we appreciate what the Government are doing—the problem continues to worsen, and the Government must be more ambitious in their action to hold water companies to account?

**Andrew Cooper:** The hon. Lady makes a fair point. We are certainly at the start of the journey, not the end, so there is more to do to get the issue under control.

I will highlight the importance of citizen science initiatives and active involvement from communities and campaign groups such as Restore the Weaver and Northwich River Heroes, which often provide invaluable data that complements the work done by organisations such as the Environment Agency. It is a shame, however, that the EA has had to rely on such people, rather than being properly resourced for the task at hand.

I am pleased we now have a Government who have swept away the inertia, neglect and failure that characterised the previous Government's approach to the activities of water companies and the protection of our waterways. Like my Labour colleagues, I have hope for a future in which we can look on poor river quality as a thing of the past.

10.2 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for setting the scene. I am aware that the Minister serves on the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee and has been a sterling voice in examining the legislation aimed at safeguarding our rivers and improving water quality.

I remember that wee song “Messing About on the River” from when I was a child—which was not yesterday, by the way. I will not sing it now, because if I sing there will be thunderstorms outside, but I am conscious that water has featured in all our lives from an early age. I will give the Northern Ireland perspective, where we have the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs—

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD) *rose*—

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Order. Jim Shannon, please carry on.

**Jim Shannon:** I was not sure if I could give way, Mr Dowd, because I am conscious of the time.

Some of the main pollution sources include agricultural run-off containing fertilisers, pesticides and animal waste. The National Farmers Union and the Ulster Farmers Union have committed to reducing their fertiliser use. Has the Minister had a chance to discuss that with them?

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) referred to Lough Neagh, which is the largest freshwater lake in Northern Ireland. It drains around 40% of Northern Ireland's land, of which three quarters are agricultural, and also supplies the water quality for the best part of Northern Ireland. Has the Minister had an opportunity to discuss that with the relevant Minister back home in Northern Ireland, Andrew Muir, to ascertain his opinions about what would be possible?

DAERA has water quality improvement strand funding, which has been running since 2020. It has benefited 47 local projects and provides some £900,000 each year. That scheme has benefited Northern Ireland. Has the Minister had a chance to discuss that with the DAERA Minister?

The Government are committed to improving water quality, and, for Members such as myself, who represent coastal areas with seaside villages, such issues are of

[Jim Shannon]

major importance to many constituents, and more must be done to ensure adequate water quality. I would like the Minister to commit to further engagement with his counterparts in the devolved Administrations to ensure that we can all pave the way to having healthy and decent water quality.

10.5 am

**Julia Buckley** (Shrewsbury) (Lab): My constituency is the beautiful, historic town of Shrewsbury, and we are famously surrounded by what we affectionately call “the loop”—the River Severn. In the past, we enjoyed the benefits of having such a beautiful, natural resource flowing through our town centre; it is fabulous for tourists and other people who enjoy walking along its banks.

However, after the last 14 years of illegal sewage dumping by Severn Trent Water, to which the last Government turned a blind eye, we have been left with a toxic, filthy river that poses a health risk to my residents. Our abundant wildlife has declined, our annual fishing contest has been cancelled and infection rates of diseases such as E. coli are on the rise among wild swimmers, paddle boarders and rowers. That affects our tourism industry and local businesses, as well as the quality of life for our local residents.

The huge volume of sewage dumped in our river by Severn Trent Water arrived not just through the 32 sewage outflows in our town centre, but, far more worryingly, through manholes on the pavement of our river paths. Sewage outflows are monitored, but manholes are not. Families, schoolchildren and dogwalkers have to wade through human excrement, sanitary products and wet wipes.

This disgraceful state of affairs is completely untenable and must be tackled urgently, so I wholeheartedly welcome the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which this Labour Government have brought so quickly to the table. It will ensure the increased accountability of private water companies so that they step up in their responsibilities to invest in the infrastructure that will better manage the sewage, rather than allowing it to pollute our watercourses.

In Shrewsbury, as in most constituencies, much of the scrutiny work is carried out by my local volunteer campaign group Up Sewage Creek—a brilliant group with a brilliant name. It recently raised its own funds to purchase more water testing kits so it can prove the impact of the overflowing manholes, which, as I said, are not already monitored. Many of my campaigners have become so frustrated that they are now pushing for nationalisation, and I understand their frustration.

**Cameron Thomas:** Will the hon. Lady join me in celebrating the activities of local campaigners who do so much to bring this scandal to light?

**Julia Buckley:** As I was saying, many of my campaigners have lost all confidence in those water companies. Although I understand their strong feelings, especially given that Severn Trent Water has given out large bonuses and is about to increase our bills by 46%, I also recognise that the Water (Special Measures) Bill will do exactly that: it

will put the water companies into special measures. It puts them on notice by scrutinising them and pushing them into corrective action with transparent governance scrutiny.

I would go further still, so my message to the water companies is that this is their last chance saloon. All eyes are on them, and the water commission will look at alternative governance mechanisms. Both for my wildlife and the health of my residents, time is running out.

10.8 am

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for securing this important and timely debate. Not a single stretch of river in my constituency is in good overall health—what a damning indictment of the Conservatives’ failure. Instead of fixing the sewage scandal, they passively allowed it to persist. It is interesting that only one Conservative Member is present.

Last month, Ofwat permitted Thames Water—the company responsible for sewage in Wokingham—to raise water bills by 35%. Thames Water has been a disaster for our water quality in Wokingham. In 2023, it was responsible for 130 sewage spills, which lasted for 943 hours. It is failing Wokingham’s rivers, which includes the beautiful River Thames and the River Loddon.

Ofwat has allowed Thames Water to charge my constituents 35% more on their water bills for the next five years, and for what? This morning, the *Financial Times* reported that Thames Water intends to circumvent Ofwat’s cap on bosses’ bonuses by gifting its executives huge pay rises. Neither I nor my constituents will stand for our water bills being hiked during a cost of living crisis only for our money to go into the pockets of the most well-paid company directors.

Does the Minister honestly expect us to trust Thames Water to behave responsibly with even higher bills, when it feels like a new story is published every day about its mismanagement of our waterways? Will the Minister make it clear to the Secretary of State that a special administrative regime is absolutely needed—and needed now—to reset this unsalvageable mess; to ensure that the existing situation, where more than a third of customer bills go towards paying interest on Thames Water’s debt, ceases; and to ensure that the money is instead spent on infrastructure improvements? For too long, customers have been asked to pay the price for the company’s failures. That has to stop.

10.11 am

**Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for securing this vital and important debate.

The quality of our rivers, lakes and seas is a concern not just for my constituents in Hexham, but nationally. I am pleased to see so many hon. Members, from most parties, in the Chamber today to share our commitment to protecting and improving water quality throughout the country.

The alarming and extremely dangerous threat of pollution and sewage not only harms our wildlife and ecological systems—our rivers are flooded with sewage

on a daily basis, which cannot be ignored—but dramatically damages the tourism business in my constituency of Hexham, which is home to some of the most beautiful landscapes in the country and to most of Northumberland national park, which I invite all hon. Members to visit. I am extremely proud that the Government's Water (Special Measures) Bill is taking the necessary first steps towards addressing the poor performance of our water companies by increasing regulation over them and criminalising the sewage pollution of our waters. The Bill is a vital step to effecting broader change across the sector. I know that the Minister sees it as a much-needed first step in challenging those practices after 14 years of neglect.

I pay tribute to groups such as the Wylam Clean Tyne group, which found in 2022 that pollution in our River Tyne exceeded safe levels by over 15 times, a shocking indictment of the previous Government's legacy. From the River Tyne to Kielder Water and Derwent reservoir, and hidden waterfalls such as Linhope Spout and Hareshaw Linn, near Bellingham, my constituency has some of the most idyllic waters in the country. We also have wildlife: woodpeckers, spotted flycatchers, wood warblers and badgers can all be seen in my constituency, as well as a number of freshwater fish—since I was elected, some Members have told me that they occasionally go fishing in my constituency. We need to protect the quality of those waters not only because it is the right thing to do but because of the fundamental difference that would make to my constituency and its local economy.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire for securing this debate, and thank the Minister for her work. I join all my constituents in calling for the Government to go further to make sure that our rivers are properly protected.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I gently remind Members that referring to who is and is not present is the road to perdition.

10.13 am

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd.

I thank the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for securing this debate on a hugely important issue that is of deep concern to residents in my constituency of North Herefordshire, which, like hers, is in the Wye catchment. The Lugg, which runs through the centre of my constituency, is a tributary of the Wye. The tributaries of the Lugg are also particularly heavily affected by water pollution, which is one of the reasons why I founded the all-party parliamentary group on water pollution on entering this House in the middle of last year.

Water pollution has terrible effects on wildlife, on people's ability to swim in and use rivers, and on the economy. Hundreds of millions of pounds of damage have been caused to the Herefordshire economy because the levels of pollution mean that we have had a moratorium on house building since 2019—that is really serious damage.

It is not just a local issue; we have heard today about what is happening all over the country. The Office for Environmental Protection in its report last year, on our prospect of meeting the legally binding 2027 target, said that we are “off track”, and it is deeply concerning that we are failing to meet that target. We need additional

measures, including additional local measures, so I call on the Minister, when she winds up, to tell us what additional measures she will take to tackle water pollution.

When I have pressed Ministers on this topic—including this Minister and the Secretary of State—in the House, they have referred to the water commission. I have read its terms of reference several times, but can the Minister tell me where they refer to the problem of agricultural pollution? They do not—I have read them very carefully. The commission does not tackle the elephant in the room. Agricultural pollution is responsible for more pollution across the country than sewage is. In constituencies such as mine, in the Wye catchment, it is the large majority.

We know what the solutions are. We need a plan and proper funding for the Wye catchment plan. We need proper funding for nature-friendly farming, because farmers have the solutions to this issue at their fingertips, but they need the Government's support. We need the Environment Agency to have the funding and teeth it requires, including to level on-the-spot fines. Fundamentally, we need Government to grasp the nettle and to tackle agricultural pollution as seriously as sewage pollution.

10.16 am

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for securing this important debate.

The title is exactly right: if we are to properly tackle water pollution, it must be from the source to the sea. I rise to talk about River Esk, the beautiful 20-mile long river that flows through my constituency to reach the North sea at Whitby. It is widely used for bathing and recreation, and the species found in it are important, ecologically and commercially. Its coastal waters are home to the European lobster and brown crab, while the tidal river is home to the freshwater pearl mussel, Atlantic salmon, sea trout and European eel.

The pearl mussel is critically endangered, and the last population in Yorkshire is to be found in the River Esk. It is dependent on the salmon and trout populations in the river during its lifecycle. The Esk once teemed with Atlantic salmon, whose numbers were a key indicator for clean water—but no longer, sadly.

The pearl mussel breeding project receives funding from Yorkshire Water, yet one of the key threats to it and to the salmon in the Esk comes from sewage discharges. Eighteen storm overflows discharge into the Esk. In 2023, there were 637 sewage spills from those overflows, with a combined duration of 2,757 hours.

However, the infrastructure—both material and regulatory—to keep the River Esk clean is crumbling and unfit for purpose. I recently visited the Yorkshire Water treatment plant at Egton Bridge, where the bank it is on is clearly subsiding into the river, and nearby manhole covers explode due to the water pressure when there is heavy rainfall. The company responsible for all this—Yorkshire Water—has paid out dividends worth £525 million since 2018.

I therefore warmly welcome the Government's Water (Special Measures) Bill, which will require independent monitoring and hit polluters such as Yorkshire Water



[Alison Hume]

where it hurts—in their bank balance. Water company profits come at the expense of communities such as mine.

10.19 am

**Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Dowd. Like our rivers, lakes and seas, our chalk streams are choked with a cocktail of chemicals and sewage. Water shortages are already becoming critical. That is the case in my constituency, which is home to precious chalk streams that are under threat.

The Conservative Government failed to stop water companies dumping raw sewage, and Ofwat continues to fail to regulate them. There was some hope that river basin management planning would achieve an overview and a strategic framework for managing our waterways' different uses and challenges. However, as has been mentioned, the Office for Environmental Protection was clear that there are not enough specific, time-bound and certain measures in the river basin management plans to achieve environmental objectives, and that there had been insufficient investment in measures to address all major pressures. Yesterday, the Government said in their response to the OEP's report on progress in improving the natural environment that the issue will be addressed by the independent commission into the water sector regulatory system led by Sir Jon Cunliffe. It is critical that the commission takes a holistic look and includes chalk streams in its review.

Storm overflows and untreated sewage regularly make headlines, but they are just part of the problem. As we have heard, phosphorous pollution is the most common reason why water bodies in England fail to achieve good ecological status, with over half of rivers failing targets. Phosphorous in the water environment comes largely from the continuous discharge of treated wastewater by the wastewater industry, with that effluent responsible for around 70% of the total load. That is endangering our chalk streams, which are a natural treasure and among the rarest habitats on earth. They are our unique heritage—as precious as the Great Barrier Reef is to Australia or as the Amazon rainforest is to South America.

The rare and beautiful chalk streams in my constituency are like a song, and the singers are the river groups that protect them: the friends of the Rivers Mel, Rhee, Granta, Shep, Orwell and Wilbraham and of the Cherry Hinton Brook, and the Cam Valley Forum. These chalk streams are under siege. Enough is enough: we need to give them specific protected status now.

10.21 am

**Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for securing this vital debate. I will focus my speech on the protection and restoration of our country's precious chalk streams—precious because of not just their unique ecology but their unique association with the English countryside.

There are estimated to be only around 200 chalk streams in the world, and the vast majority are in England. I am proud that two of them—the Pang and

the Kennet—run through my constituency. Not only are their nutrient-rich waters home to a rich diversity of species, but they are beloved by local anglers, dog walkers and families. Their beauty has inspired many, with the Pang said to be the inspiration for “The Wind in the Willows”.

However, the Pang and the Kennet have seen a devastating decline in recent years. According to Environment Agency data, the Pang's ecological status has gone from good in 2016 to moderate in 2019, and it is now rated as poor. Last year, I tested the Pang with local campaigners from the Angling Trust and found that phosphate levels were three times what they should be. That leads to increased algae, depleted oxygen and significant damage to wildlife, plants and fish. Action for the River Kennet has estimated that Thames Water's sewage works account for 52% of the phosphate pollution in the river, but Thames Water has so far refused to include phosphate stripping in its plans for the sewage works at Hampstead Norreys. It has said it will review the issue, but that is not good enough: we need real action, and I call on Thames Water for just that.

I welcome the actions the Government have taken to tackle the water companies that have been acting without accountability for too long. The Water (Special Measures) Bill will finally penalise water bosses who pollute our water. I am looking forward to working with the Minister to clean up the Pang, the Kennet and all our chalk streams—an ambition I know she shares.

The beautiful west Berkshire villages nestled along the banks of the beautiful River Pang have suffered terribly as Thames Water has pumped raw sewage into the river. In Hampstead Norreys, raw sewage ran for months down the main street; in Compton, residents had to erect a sign to ask drivers to drive slowly so that they did not splash schoolchildren with putrid water.

Enough is enough: we must restore our chalk streams to their former glory, so that the Pang—captured so wonderfully by Kenneth Grahame in “The Wind in the Willows”—can continue to be

“a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea.”

10.24 am

**Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) on securing this debate. There are two chalk streams in the Winchester constituency—the River Itchen and the River Meon. The River Itchen flows through the heart of our city; it is not just a beautiful part of our environment but part of our cultural heritage as well.

There has been a lot of talk about chalk streams in the Chamber today, including in the eloquent contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings). However, we must remember never to take these streams for granted. There are only 210 chalk streams in the world, and 85% are in southern England. The biodiversity and ecosystems of some of them are completely unique, and these streams have been designated as sites of special scientific interest. In the southern chalk streams, for example, the Atlantic salmon are genetically distinct from those in the rest of the ocean. In that respect, dumping sewage and other pollutants in sites of special scientific interest is not only morally wrong but an act of ecological vandalism.

Although we support many of the measures the Government have brought forward, after the last Government ignored sewage dumping for so long, we have a couple of specific concerns about chalk streams. One is about the recent statement confirming plans by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to scrap the chalk stream protective pack, without anything else being announced specifically to replace it. Chalk streams form over millions of years and are a unique part of our heritage. The Government need to recognise their importance and not merely lump action on them in with other protective measures. Will the Minister therefore please discuss the Department's plans to put together a chalk stream-specific recovery plan and to achieve special protective status for all chalk streams?

To finish off, I congratulate and pay tribute to all the community groups in Winchester that work so hard on chalk streams—the citizen scientists, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, and the river keepers. They are really working hard, and we and the Government need to support them in every way we can.

10.26 am

**Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr. Dowd, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for securing this important debate.

South East Cornwall is known for its beautiful environment, both on land and at sea, which attracts millions of visitors every year. Yet we face a growing water quality crisis, which threatens our environment, public health, livelihoods and local biodiversity. South East Cornwall has been ranked 14th in the UK for the number of hours of sewage dumping in 2023. In Duloe, residents and the parish council have been instrumental in raising awareness. They came together to campaign against the high levels of sewage being dumped in the Looe river, and through their efforts achieved improvements in the river's water quality.

Good water quality in our rivers, lakes and seas is vital to rural and coastal communities such as mine. Tourism is essential to Cornwall's economy, but it relies on clean beaches and safe waters. Poor water quality deters visitors, which really impacts the small businesses that depend on them, as well as wild swimmers, some of whom have reported illness, including members of my own wild swimming group.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): The hon. Lady talks about swimmers falling ill because of sewage dumping, and the same thing has happened to groups of teenagers in my constituency. The most recent issue with sewage dumping in my patch involved a flooded field, and I am grateful to all the constituents who sent me photos of the raw sewage in that field. I am sure the hon. Lady will agree that the Water (Special Measures) Bill is a real opportunity to move forward and tackle some of these issues, but does she also agree that we need to go even further, possibly by having a sewage tax—

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Thank you.

**Lisa Smart**—to make the water companies pay for the damage they cause?

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Order. Will people pay respect to the Chair's decision? When I ask you to sit down, would you please do so? Thank you very much.

**Anna Gelderd:** Thank you, Mr Dowd, and I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention.

I thank Feargal Sharkey, who visited my constituency last summer, and I thank the Minister for all her work on this important topic. Feargal Sharkey met local residents with me and heard the strength of local feeling on this issue. Our fishing communities suffer from poor water quality, which can cause habitat degradation and put our commercial catches at risk. Research by the Marine Conservation Society and the University of Portsmouth has shown a worrying increase in chemicals such as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances in seaweed. PFAS, which are known as forever chemicals because of their highly persistent qualities, do not break down in our natural environment. They accumulate in the environment and in our food chain, impacting biodiversity and public health. This is a serious concern, and I look forward to working with the Minister to do more to address it.

Labour's Water (Special Measures) Bill is a much-needed first step towards improving the accountability and performance of water companies, which is something I welcome and I congratulate the Minister on. It is time to ensure that water bosses can no longer sell us down the river. Customer service, environmental protection and investment in infrastructure must be prioritised over profit in relation to what is fundamentally a public asset.

**Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** Order. I ask the hon. Gentleman not to intervene, because we are right up against it. Thank you.

**Anna Gelderd:** I know my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) is an important champion for Cornwall as well.

South East Cornwall's beautiful, natural environment is priceless, and I applaud the determination of my local residents to make a difference. We also have the national leadership that is so essential to tackle this crisis. The Government are already taking action to clean up the mess that we inherited, and we know that the Water (Special Measures) Bill is a vital first step to support constituencies such as mine, and local campaigners in them. I look forward to working with the Minister to restore water quality, protect our environment, improve public health and secure livelihoods in South East Cornwall.

10.30 am

**Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in a debate with you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. Diolch yn fawr to my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) for securing this debate.

There has been a lot of talk today about the issue of sewage dumping and the important Water (Special Measures) Bill, which I fully support. However, I am here to talk about Bown Pond in Fradley, a village in my

[*Dave Robertson*]

constituency. On 11 December last year it had a serious pollution incident involving not sewage, but some form of hydrocarbon—probably an oil, but we are yet to see the result. The lake is well respected by local residents and it is a huge amenity for the village, but when the foam discovered on the surface of the pond was identified, that was followed by almost all the fish in the pond dying and a whole family of swans needing to be transferred to Linjoy Wildlife Sanctuary in Burton. I really commend the sanctuary for its work, but unfortunately it was unable to save the cygnets and had to put the swans to sleep, because whatever was in the water had burned the swan's tongues, leaving ulcers. That was a real concern to residents in Fradley and me, and a very distressing incident for everybody concerned.

I know the Environment Agency is working hard on it, but almost a month later we have not yet had the results of the investigations into the water. At this point, I ask the Minister: can we look very closely at the resourcing of the Environment Agency? After 14 years of cuts upon cuts, we need to make sure that we are giving that vital piece of our regulatory framework the resources that it needs to investigate such incidents and make sure that prosecutions follow up where necessary.

**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I would like to give Catherine Fookes a minute or two at the end to wind up, so I hope the Minister and spokespersons will bear that in mind.

10.32 am

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Dowd. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes), who made a great speech, and has introduced this important issue to this place this morning. I pay tribute to all Members who made remarks during this debate, including, of course, the references they made to the issues that they face in their communities. This is a nationwide issue, which the Liberal Democrats have chosen to champion—we are so committed to cleaning up our waters that our leader refuses to stop falling into our waterways until this matter is resolved.

We are talking about lakes, rivers and seas, and I have them all in my patch—well, not all of them, but a large chunk of them, as the Member of Parliament for the English lake district. I will not list off all the lakes and rivers, as I have been known to in the past, because we only have so much time. We are all proud of our constituencies, and it is a huge privilege to represent mine, but we recognise that in our communities we are there to be stewards of, and to preserve, the lakes, rivers, becks and tarns, and Morecambe bay in my constituency—not just for us, but for everybody else.

Those are national parks, and the lake district is even a world heritage site, so while what happens in our waterways is deeply personal to us, we also recognise it is of great significance to the future of our country and indeed even of our planet. The impact on our ecology, biodiversity and water quality is important, but let us not forget—as has been mentioned by other Members—the importance to our tourism economy. Some 20 million people visit the lakes every year and they deserve to visit a place that is as pristine as it should be.

I will run through some of the issues affecting our communities. Just last year, the Shap pumping station released sewage for 1,000 hours into Docker beck and sewage was dumped into the river Lowther at Askham water treatment works for 414 hours. In November last year, we found that the number of poor bathing waters had risen to the highest level since the introduction of the four-tier classification system. That shamefully included Coniston Water. Windermere had sewage dumped into it 345 times, totalling 5,259 hours over the course of 2023.

I will say a quick word about pollution in lakes. A drop of water that enters Windermere at the north end takes nine months to work its way through, so the impact of sewage on bodies of water such as lakes and tarns is even greater than it is on our rivers and seas. The impact on Morecambe bay is hugely significant as well. We saw 757 sewage dumps there just in 2023. One of the things that is so grievous is the impunity with which those things take place. In 2021, there were 500,000 sewage dumps across the United Kingdom, and a grand total of 16 of them were deemed liable for prosecution. Of those, eight attracted fines of less than £50,000. In other words, it was worth the water company's while to dump that sewage, because there was no way of holding it to account.

I have said this before, and it is so important: we speak with such passion on all sides about this issue, yet thousands of people are working in our water industries—for the water companies, for Ofwat, for the Environment Agency and for various other bodies—and I pay tribute to them. The temperature of this debate can often be high, and I want them to know that they are valued, and that we do not blame them; we blame the system within which they work. Radical change is needed.

It is a privilege to serve alongside the Minister and others in this place on the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee. Alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), we have tabled 44 amendments to that Bill; not one of them has been accepted so far, but we have one more day to go, so here's hoping. That demonstrates our commitment to trying to engage proactively with this issue. We think it seriously matters. The issues we have sought to highlight through that Committee include the need to create a new clean water authority, to have special priority for waterways in national parks and for chalk streams, to protect our rivers and drinking water from forever chemicals and to put environmental experts on the boards of water companies.

The Government—I praise them for this—are rightly putting citizen science at the heart of monitoring. They need to do two things if they are serious about that, and one is to make sure that they equip, support and resource those citizen scientists. I pay tribute to Save Windermere, the Clean River Kent campaign, the South Cumbria Rivers Trust, the Eden Rivers Trust and many others in our communities, but those people need to be on the boards and committees so that they can influence decisions, as well as being equipped to hold people to account. We need radical change, and I fear that this Government are not quite proposing it.

We have a real problem when it comes to regulation. In the end, we have a fragmented regulatory framework. Ofwat, the EA and other bodies are under-resourced and underpowered and the system is fragmented, so the water companies simply run rings around them. The evidence of that is that Ofwat levied £168 million of



finest nearly four years ago against three water companies, and it has collected a precise total of zero pounds and zero pence from them, because it simply does not have the culture and powers it needs. Before Christmas, it sanctioned a more than 30% increase in our water bills. In the north-west alone, 11% of all our water bills is going to service the £8.9 billion debt of United Utilities, and it is far worse with Thames Water and in other parts of our country.

People have mentioned farmers and farm run-off. One of the major problems with the agricultural impact on pollution is the past Government's and this Government's botching of the transition to the new farm payment scheme. This Government taking 76% out of the basic payment this year will push a load of farmers to move away from environmental action altogether. It will be massively counterproductive. Back our farmers and they will help us to clean up our environment.

In short, we in the Liberal Democrat corner of the Chamber—well represented this morning, as always—are impatient for change. We welcome and support the Bill. As a bit of an old-timer, I neutrally observe that Labour Governments tend to fall into one particular trap: they always assume they will be in power for longer than they actually will be, and they drag their feet and do not do the radical things they should. I say to them: “You’re already at least 10% of the way through this Parliament—get on with it!”

10.39 am

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) on securing this really important debate. Improving water quality is something that we all care about, on all sides of the House. Making sure that all those who pollute are held—in the strongest possible terms—to account and that those who need to carry out improvement measures to improve water quality are incentivised to do so matters to us all. That is why, when the Conservatives were in Government, we took action.

The narrative that has been put across by many hon. Members in their contributions to this debate, that the last Conservative Government did nothing, is for the birds. We brought in the Environment Act in 2021; we introduced a plan for water that was about more investment, stronger regulation, and tougher enforcement. Of course, it is vital to understand where the problem lies, which is why we increased monitoring. Back in 2010, only 7% of storm overflows were monitored. We are now at 100%.

We have also seen designated bathing water sites improve their water quality status from 2010, when only 76% of bathing water sites were classified as good or excellent. We are now at 90%, despite stronger regulation having been brought out in 2015. We introduced the ban on water company bosses’ bonuses. We linked dividend payments to environmental performance. We removed the cap on civil penalties from £250,000 per incident to an unlimited amount. We also brought forward the largest infrastructure programme, with £60 billion allocated to revamp ageing assets and reduce the number of sewage spills, allocated funds specifically for our farmers to store more water on their land through water management grants and rolled out the slurry infrastructure grant.

**Peter Swallow:** The hon. Member mentions the monitoring of overflows. Will he put on record for the House how many emergency overflows were being monitored under his Government?

**Robbie Moore:** I come back to the point that monitoring is incredibly important. This is why we brought out a requirement for all water companies to specifically carry out more monitoring: before 2010, only 7% of storm overflows were monitored. That is completely unacceptable. We needed to understand the problem so that we could not only use our regulators to enforce water companies to carry out the level of investment we would expect of them, but strongly hold those water companies, and indeed all polluters, to account. I encourage the Government to keep going with that, which is why we have taken a constructive approach to the Water (Special Measures) Bill that is working its way through the House.

There are three points which I want to focus on and I would be grateful if the Minister could address them in her response. First are the points that have been made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), to do with the £35 million allocation to the River Wye action plan, announced earlier this year. The River Wye action plan was specifically designed to address those challenges to do with pollution from our farmers. The plan set out a range of measures to begin protecting the river immediately from pollution and establish a long-term plan to restore the river for future generations. That included requiring large poultry farms to export manure away from areas where they would otherwise cause excess pollution and providing a fund of up to £35 million for grant support for on-farm poultry manure combustion combustors in the River Wye special area of conservation. The plan also appointed a chair.

I would therefore like to ask the Minister why the plan has been dropped, despite those things having been put in place? Where has the £35 million been reallocated? We are now six months into this Labour Government, but yet there has been no announcement on the River Wye and I fear that there will be no action taken. We are almost coming up to a year since that plan was worked on. If the Minister could update the House on that, it would be greatly appreciated.

The second point is the water restoration fund, which was specifically designed to ringfence money that had been collected from those water companies that had been polluting, to focus specifically on improving water quality. The fund, when it was announced, allocated £11 million-worth of penalties collected from water companies to be offered on a grant basis to local support groups, farmers, landowners and community-led schemes. Hon. Members have talked about how good their local campaigners are at utilising funds that are provided to them, and I absolutely endorse that, but that fund was specifically ringfenced for penalty money reclaimed from water companies to be reinvested.

The Government are not taking the water restoration fund forward, so will the Minister accept the Conservative amendment to the Water (Special Measures) Bill on that point? The water restoration fund came exclusively from water company fines and penalties, which are in addition to any other work the company must carry out to repair breaches that it has caused. Will the Minister explain why the Government are not continuing the

[Robbie Moore]

fund, and why she does not think it is important that water companies clean up their own mess when money has been collected from them?

**Andrew Cooper:** The previous Government cut the environmental protection budget for the Environment Agency from £170 million in 2009-10 to £76 million in 2019-20. Does the shadow Minister accept that some of the actions that he has spoken about might not have been necessary had the Environment Agency been funded properly to carry out the important work that it was doing?

**Robbie Moore:** We all have to acknowledge that water companies have not been meeting their environmental obligations for far too long. That is why we implemented the monitoring. Regulators—Ofwat, the Drinking Water Inspectorate and the Environment Agency—need robust powers so that they can carry out enforcement.

The water restoration fund ringfenced money collected from the water companies and that allowed farmers, landowners and the many great campaigning organisations that want to carry out nature-based solutions to improve water quality, and there was the additional expectation that water companies put in place their own improvement measures. I ask the Minister: why on earth would the Government not want to continue that approach?

My third point is about bathing water designations, which are a fantastic way of reassuring those who want to bathe in specific areas, whether our lakes, rivers or coastal environments. They also put a greater obligation on the Environment Agency and water companies to carry out additional monitoring.

In May 2024, I was delighted to announce 27 new bathing water sites ahead of the 2024 bathing water season. That brought the number of bathing water sites across England up to 451. In addition, I announced a review of the bathing water regulations, which I had been advocating for some time. Our constituents do not just swim at bathing water sites, but use them for other activities, including canoeing, kayaking and other water-based activities. I very much wanted to see the review of the bathing water regulations, and we announced the change to increase the user basis. I also wanted to see an increase in bathing water designations beyond May to September so that all-year monitoring could take place, and the removal of the automatic de-designation of poor sites so that sites that had been consistently rated poor could keep their designation to keep up the pressure on the water companies and the Environment Agency to continue monitoring. Will the Minister update the House on what is happening with that announcement, which was made last year? What is she doing to ensure bathing water regulations are enhanced and improved?

In the run-up to the general election, Labour made huge promises about what it would do to improve water quality. I feel that it is falling far short on its promises to the electorate. Although we will work constructively with the Government to improve their measures, campaigners—it is not just me—feel that the Water (Special Measures) Bill does not go far enough, and investors feel that they are being penalised while the Government expect them to carry out improvement

measures. The Government are penalising our farmers, not only through the family farm tax, but by not providing water grants to them to carry out improvement measures.

10.49 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) not only for securing this debate but for her work on the Water (Special Measures) Bill. I thank all the campaigning groups and environmental groups that have been mentioned throughout the debate for the work they do in our communities. The number of MPs who have attended the debate—or at least, the number on the Government Benches—shows how popular and important it is.

As I listened to the comments from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), I felt a little confused, because he does not seem to recognise or understand the level of anger and resentment towards his Government on this issue. He listed all the amazing achievements of the previous Government. I wonder how those stack up against the facts we have heard in the debate about the level of sewage that is being pumped into our rivers, lakes and seas, the ecological standard of many of our rivers, lakes and seas and the fact that people are so angry about the situation. I gently suggest that, rather than try to rewrite history or place alternative facts on to the record of *Hansard*, he would do better to acknowledge the fact that his Government got this issue so dreadfully wrong. That is why—as we have in many Departments and on many issues—we have had to come and, in this case, literally clean up the mess we have been left with.

The quality of our rivers, lakes and seas and our water is essential for supporting ecosystems, providing clean drinking water and producing our food, and of course, as Members have said, our beautiful rivers, lakes, seas and beaches are a source of pride for our communities, and we want to restore them to that. Maintaining healthy and clean water sources is vital to achieving this Government's mission for economic growth, and the £104 billion of investment in the next five years in the water sector will help to clean up our waters and with very important job creation up and down the country.

Water systems are under massive pressure, no thanks to the 14 years of mismanagement that they have just gone through, and water bodies such as the River Wye and the River Usk in Monmouthshire face significant challenges due to agricultural run-off from intensive poultry farming, leading to high phosphate levels in our water. More broadly, my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire is right to question the quality of our water due to increasing pressures from pollution, climate change and unsustainable practices.

The Government are prioritising water quality as a key element of their environmental and public health agenda. Significant steps are being taken to address pollution, enhance infrastructure and ensure clean and sustainable water sources for future generations. In his first week in office—it is slightly amusing that we are criticised by the Opposition for not solving all the problems in our first six months—the Secretary of State

secured agreement from water companies and Ofwat to ringfence money for vital infrastructure upgrades, so that it cannot be diverted to shareholder payouts and bonus payments. The Government's Water (Special Measures) Bill, which has been in Committee this week, sets out measures to crack down on water companies failing their customers, and the independent commission on the water sector regulatory system was launched by the UK and Welsh Governments in October 2024, as the third stage of this Government's water strategy to clean up the mess we have inherited.

I will quickly respond to some of the contributions from my hon. Friends. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) is right to share his upset and anger at the number of sewage spills damaging his constituency, which have continued for the past 14 years. I thank him for his support for the Water (Special Measures) Bill. Monitors will be installed and then verified independently. My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) is a brilliant champion for her area, on both flooding and sewage, and I agree that we are blessed with many beautiful rivers, lakes and seas. I quite like the sound of that hidden river cabin; maybe that is worth a visit.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) mentioned the chronic under-investment in sewage infrastructure, and he is absolutely correct. That is why we need the £104 billion investment, to clean up and deal with the mess we have inherited. I will speak to the farming Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), and get a precise answer to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I count him as an hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) talked about how appalled she is by sewage coming up through manhole covers. That sounds dreadful and I am happy to discuss that with her after the debate. I like the sound of Up Sewage Creek—that is a catchy name for a local campaign group. I thank her for her work, not just in this area. We have had many conversations and she is standing up for her community, as has been noticed and recognised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) is right to highlight the damage to tourism in his beautiful constituency, and the work being done by local campaign groups. I thank him too for his support for the Water (Special Measures) Bill that will bring forward the reforms we desperately need.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) highlighted the decline in fish stocks, in an area near my constituency that I like to visit, and the need to tackle sewage and pollution. I thank her for her support. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) highlighted the important issue of phosphate pollution, and I am happy to support her work pushing Thames Water to tackle that.

My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) championed her beautiful area of the country and highlighted the damage done by sewage. Having listened to the speeches given by Conservative Members, one might have imagined the problem had already been solved, but in reality it has not and it is damaging her beautiful area. She also raised the dangers caused by PFAS. My hon. Friend the Member for

Lichfield (Dave Robertson) talked about an incredibly concerning serious pollution incident. I am happy to look into the issue and find out what is happening with the EA investigation.

The theme of agriculture came up during the debate. Working with farmers to reduce agriculture pollution is key to delivery against the Government's priority to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas. The Environment Act 2021 set a legally binding target to reduce nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment contribution from agriculture by at least 40% by 2038. Alongside developing a new statutory plan to restore nature and meet those targets, this Government are enforcing key regulations, such as the farming rules for water, and have carried out thousands of advice-led inspections through the Environment Agency.

Investment is directed to environmental land management schemes, including the sustainable farming incentive, and supported by the catchment sensitive farming programme, which are designed to help farmers protect water quality and adopt sustainable practices while maintaining viable businesses. The Secretary of State announced just last week at the Oxford farming conference that we will ensure permitted development rights work for farmers, so we can support them to reduce water pollution through improved slurry stores, anaerobic digesters and small reservoirs.

In my remaining time, I will respond to the main points raised about the River Wye. This Government are actively progressing the next steps for the River Wye, including building stronger ties and working collaboratively with the Welsh Government, the Environment Agency and Natural England, as well as local MPs, farmers and ENGOS who are already doing great work to tackle pollution. Indeed, when I held a meeting with the River Wye partnership, which the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) and others attended, and mentioned that we would not be continuing with the previous Government's plan, those present applauded, such was their condemnation of that plan. I do not wish to test hon. Members' knowledge of geography, but one of the main problems with the previous Government's plan was that it did not involve the Welsh Government. I would suggest that any plan to tackle the River Wye's problems ought to include consulting the Administration responsible for where the river starts and ends.

**Ellie Chowns:** Does the Minister agree that the problem with the way the £35 million was previously supposed to be spent was that it was the opposite of the "polluter pays" principle, because it was essentially a subsidy to the most polluting industry? Will she agree to find £35 million to support nature-friendly farming in the Wye catchment to solve the issue?

**Emma Hardy:** I thank the hon. Lady, but I have been told I have 15 seconds left. We will develop a plan for the River Wye and I will let hon. Members know about it as soon as possible.

The unacceptable destruction of our waterways should never happen again and we are working to tackle the challenge. Efforts are already underway locally and nationally that will support restoration of rivers. The independent commission will report in June 2025. I look forward to working with hon. Members to take this important agenda forward and clear up the mess that we have been left.



**Peter Dowd (in the Chair):** I call Catherine Fookes, who has maybe 30 seconds to sum up.

10.59 am

**Catherine Fookes:** I thank all hon. Members for their contributions that demonstrate the strength of feeling in the House, especially from Labour Members, about the quality of our rivers, lakes and seas. We have had a tour, from Cornwall to Hexham, Whitby and everywhere in between. We heard about the idyllic sounding hidden river cabins and the not so idyllic sounding Up Sewage Creek in Shrewsbury. I thank the Minister for explaining what she is doing to work with us on the Wye catchment partnership. I look forward to all of us continuing to work to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas, so that we restore them to the wonderful quality they should have.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered water quality in rivers, lakes and seas.

## Town Centres: Stoke-on-Trent

[KARL TURNER *in the Chair*]

11 am

**Karl Turner (in the Chair):** I will call Gareth Snell to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for town centres in Stoke-on-Trent.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for this debate, Mr Turner, and to see Mr Dowd offering you a skilled hand.

This year is the centenary of Stoke-on-Trent, which was founded as a city in 1925, following the federation of the six towns in 1910. It is a city based on a partnership of equals: there are six towns, of which I have the pleasure of representing three and a half; I share one of them with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner). As we look forward to the next 100 years, our city has to consider the future of its town centres, what we hope to achieve in them, and what role they can play in delivering the Government's ambitious programme of growth, housing and economic regeneration.

The past 14 years have been tough for my city. Had the last Government simply kept our revenue grant at its 2010-11 level in cash terms, there would have been over £400 million extra to spend in over that time. As it happens, they did not, and year-on-year cuts by the last Government have left the city in a perilous financial state. That has led to an undignified situation in which Stoke-on-Trent is forced to bid against our neighbouring cities simply to have a share of any prosperity fund, levelling-up fund or other fund—an undignified beauty parade that fails to recognise that every town and city centre in this country deserves to thrive.

Town centres are more than places for shopping. The town centres that I represent in Fenton, Hanley, Stoke and a part of Longton are about pride, community and dignity of place. They not only have an economic benefit, but are the mesh that holds society together in our city.

**Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the fantastic work of the Longton Exchange team and Urban Wilderness in their commitment to regenerating Longton town centre? Does he also agree that we need much more work and investment to return Longton to its full glory?

**Gareth Snell:** My hon. Friend has basically stolen one part of my speech, because I was going to congratulate Longton Exchange on the mini-renaissance that is taking place in that town, and in particular the work it does on the Longton carnival and the pig walk—unfortunately, I was unable to make it last year, but I very much intend to be there in April for this year's. It is those sort of small cultural events—and the small but determined work of dogged individuals who love where they live and have pride in the place they call home—that will deliver the upturn and improvement to our town centres.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. There will not be a town centre in this great United Kingdom that

does not suffer from the problem of online shopping, which takes trade away from the town centre. Does he agree that one of the things that could be done—we look to the Minister on this—is to help micro and small businesses in city centres with start-up funds? Those businesses bring people in, bring employment in and help the economy.

**Gareth Snell:** The hon. Gentleman, as always, is absolutely right. He has hit the nail on the head. Whether it is Strangford or Stoke-on-Trent, the town centres and small and medium-sized enterprises, whether they are a service, a community organisation or retail, are sometimes the places that people have most affinity with because they have a personal relationship with the owner. In Stoke-on-Trent we find that the microbusinesses that can be run from someone's garage or back bedroom thrive.

The big stores tend to be able to weather the economic climate that we find ourselves in, but for mid-sized shops the high street is probably just outside of financial reach because of business rates and because the footfall is not there. The high street is struggling because of the decisions of the last Government. Regardless of fault, things need to be addressed by the present Government. I have absolute confidence that the Minister and his team at the Department will do that.

I want to focus mostly on Hanley city centre, but I also want to pay tribute, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, to the amazing work in Longton. I will not repeat what she has already adequately and wonderfully put on the record, but I want to briefly talk about Fenton and Stoke. Fenton is a town that Arnold Bennett did not really forget. He took it out of the books because he did not like his mother-in-law, but that is an entirely different debate.

The work being done around Fenton town hall to turn the area into a vibrant community hub is fabulous; I am thinking of Ben Husdan and the community interest company that he works with, and Restoke, which runs the town hall, and the Step Up Stoke charities. I hold my surgeries in the café there and when I have time off I go there to enjoy the city that I live in and call home. The events run there draw people in from all over the west midlands; they have demonstrated that, with determination and a little bit of community spirit, something wonderful can be achieved. A model has been put together that could be used in other parts of Stoke-on-Trent.

I also want to pay tribute to the work being done by Jeff Nash and his team at the Spode site in Stoke. A hub is emerging there with support from levelling-up funds. To give credit to the last Government, they put some money in, as did the city council. The site demonstrates that the heritage buildings in my constituency, which are sometimes considered to be part of our past, can actually be part of our future. And that demonstrates that with a bit of imagination and a bit of support, which I know the Government are committed to, we can deliver real regeneration, new homes and good quality jobs for the new future for the city that I think is there.

I turn to Hanley—possibly the most challenging town centre of the six towns that make up Stoke-on-Trent. The Minister is aware of that because he kindly met me, along with Councillor Jane Ashworth, leader of Stoke-on-Trent council, chief exec Jon Rouse, and Rachel

Laver, the wonderful chief executive of the Chambers of Commerce. For many years Hanley has been a challenge. It has been seen as, “If we fix Hanley, we fix everything else”, and there is an argument that that is correct. But the solutions have always dwarfed the scale of the challenge.

Like Hull, Mr Turner, Stoke-on-Trent deserved more from the last Government. We were given levelling-up funds, but the last Conservative council decided that the best thing they could do with the support offered was to build a car park. An economically deprived city's working age people in in-work poverty were told that their lives were going to be levelled up with the building of a multi-storey, colourful car park on the edge of the city centre—and “That's your lot!” That car park, ironically, is now costing the council money because it was so poorly planned and executed that the revenue it should have generated is not there. It is now a loss for the council, which is a demonstration of the legacy of the last Government.

On top of that, the last Conservative council made grand aspirational plans for arenas and shopping centres. On paper, they looked wonderful—what the artist's impression showed would be wanted in every town centre. But there was no plan, no money and no intention. That is something that the council learned from the last Conservative Government when it comes to economic regeneration across this country.

We look to the Government not to solve our problems for us—I want to be clear to the Minister that I am not here with a begging bowl to ask for handouts; I firmly believe that the future of our city has to be driven by our city—but for them to join us in a new partnership by putting the governmental shoulder behind our municipal wheel. If we are able to forge a new partnership for the city centre, we will meet the housing demand. We can more than meet the demands placed on us by Government, and then some, if we have the land consolidation powers that Homes England executes, and if we had a self-replenishing fund for the pump-priming work, and could look at remediation of brownfield sites.

We have the building blocks in the city centre. The work done by Richard Buxton, Jonathan Bellamy and Rachel Laver, through the city centre's business improvement district, is phenomenal. They almost always have a bright idea about something we could do in Stoke-on-Trent to bring people into the city, whether that is food markets or their work on supplementing the municipal support they should have had from a council suffering budget cuts. That is the wardens, street cleaning and street scene work.

We have good policing led by Sergeant Chris Gifford, doing their best to ensure that the city centre feels safe. That is also a challenge because of the reduction in drug and alcohol support services that the previous Government thrust upon us, meaning that people who need help cannot get it, so they gravitate to our town centre, causing a social problem.

**David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for this important debate. He notes that crime and antisocial behaviour is an issue that can put off people coming to our town centres. I hear the point about how we use levelling-up funds or certain types of funds to make our town centres better. A key to that is how we engage with local community leaders and retailers to ensure we get the plans right. We got £20 million,

[David Williams]

including £6.5 million to make improvements to Burslem, Tunstall and Middleport, and we are looking at how we—

**Karl Turner (in the Chair):** Order.

**Gareth Snell:** I hear what my hon. Friend is saying, but in a half-hour debate I do not have time to address all his points. He is right that reduction in crime in the town centre helps people feel safe and brings in more people to spend money there. There is a virtuous circle of activity that is not just about getting more shops on the high street, but making people who come feel safer.

That also links to public transport. One of the conversations being pursued locally, through the bus improvement partnership and the work we hope might come from future reorganisation and devolution, is that we can massively improve our public transport network, so we can get the people into town centres who want to shop there. At the moment, we have a perverse situation in which the bus station is far away from the shopping centre. Walking down the hill to get there is fine, but walking back up the hill is far too much for some—particularly older members of my community, who simply cannot make the journey and do not go there. It is those small things we can do that will massively impact on economic benefits.

I want to pitch to the Minister something he knows we aspire to. The challenge we now face in Stoke-on-Trent is that we cannot do it alone. We are not asking for it to be done for us, but we cannot do it alone. We would like to explore, with the Government and some form of urban development company, a delivery vehicle that allows the master plan being put together by the city council and the chamber of commerce to have cross-governmental support, demonstrating to businesses in my city that we are taking this seriously.

The other problem we have had, which you will probably have experienced in Hull, Mr Turner, is that plan after plan is written, presented, goes on the shelf and is never seen again. People's confidence that we can deliver the things we promise has been dented. By demonstrating that this partnership could exist between government locally and nationally would go a long way to getting the business buy-in, which is crucial to the regeneration of our city centre and high streets.

I also want to pitch to the Minister that certain powers come with that. We have brownfield sites across the city in our three constituencies that are ripe for development. But they are owned by people who have no interest in my city. They are often passed through different shell companies and corporations, because they are an asset that is traded, as opposed to being an asset of value to the city. Being able to access compulsory purchase arrangements that Homes England has for land consolidation, would mean we could parcel up those bigger sites for development.

That would allow us to develop city-centre living, for which there is a demand. The Clayworks development in the middle of Hanley has been so successful it has had a 90% occupancy rate from its first day of opening, which is completely unprecedented in the city. It is high-quality, affordable housing for young and aspiring professionals in a trendy setting. More of that in our city centre would bring people who have a disposable

pound in their pocket to come and live, shop and work there. We also have two fabulous universities, which are clearly desperate to take some of the work they are doing to attract people to north Staffordshire to give them a night-time economy offer.

Some of the work, which the Minister is aware of, that we wish to do in the city centre links not only to the day-time retail offer, but to how we can turn our city centres into a night-time economy that people want to come and visit. That would support our restaurants, bars and wonderful theatres across the conurbation, and also links to the policing work so that people feel safe at night.

I welcome the work that the Government have already laid out. That includes the additional community policing that we will have in the town centres, which will absolutely reduce some of the latent antisocial behaviour and crime and is a deterrent, as well as the work we are doing on devolving bus powers so that we can have an integrated transport network to get people to where they need to be. I welcome the fact that this Government recognise that high street theft from shops—shoplifting—is a real problem. We will take it seriously and remove the arbitrary cap of £200, so that, if someone commits a crime in the city centre, we will come for them.

I also welcome the investment in drug and alcohol services, so that those in our town centres who are desperately seeking support from the very generous people of my city can get that support in a much more structured and maintained way. We must also make sure that our really ambitious housing targets are achieved in our town centres, so that we can bring people back to our town centres, invigorate them and bring them back to life, and also demonstrate—as we look toward the next 100 years of Stoke-on-Trent, in this, our centenary year—that we have a bright and prosperous future, driven by a partnership between the Stoke-on-Trent city council and this Labour Government.

11.16 am

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** It is an absolute pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Turner, as well as the reassuring presence of Mr Dowd at your side, stewarding the debate along. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) for securing this very important debate in Stoke-on-Trent's centenary year.

My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituency. Although the city, as he rightly said, has experienced hard times over recent years, his constituents should know that, from the outset of this Government coming into office, he has been pressing me on what more this Labour Government can do, in partnership with local leaders and my hon. Friends, to ensure that we maximise the opportunities in the city as we go forward. I share his passion to support the regeneration of the town centres of Stoke-on-Trent and to create better places to live, work and play across the city.

My hon. Friend referenced the meeting we had just a few weeks ago, alongside members of the council, to discuss their plans for a comprehensive regeneration of Stoke-on-Trent city centre. It was clear from that meeting that they are keen to make sure that the city plays a full role in delivering on the Government's growth strategy, including delivering on a substantial number of new homes, as part of our Plan for Change milestone to build 1.5 million new homes in this Parliament.



Stoke-on-Trent city centre is facing the same problems as many town centres across the country: lower occupancy rates and footfall due to consumer habits changing, which make a retail, office-led city centre strategy difficult for the future. I have been pleased to see, in the case of Stoke-on-Trent—as well as other cities across the country where Labour Members and Labour local leaders are in place—that the new Labour-run city council, under the leadership of Councillor Jane Ashworth, has brought forward a committed and energetic programme and a serious plan for Hanley to take things forward, which will see a radical shift to a residential-led model, aiming to create a revitalised city centre that can play a strengthened socioeconomic role and unlock the development of thousands of new homes, through the process that we discussed.

It has been good to see that so much of the regeneration in Stoke-on-Trent is already well under way. My hon. Friend has referenced a number of the very positive changes that are taking place, including the Smithfield Quarter, a fantastic mixed-use development that pays homage to the original Smithfield bottle works on the site and is an excellent example of intertwining cultural heritage while also looking to the future needs of the city.

The Government have supported this vital regeneration work through Homes England, which has been working successfully with the council for many years. In 2022, a partnership agreement was signed with the council to accelerate the delivery of high-quality, place-making, housing-led and mixed-use developments in the city. The partnership aims to unlock, as my hon. Friend is aware, 4,000 homes across a range of sites within the city, and has to date supported 607 homes across several sites.

The city has also been in receipt of considerable capital investment from Homes England over recent years, including £22 million of affordable housing programme investment and £10 million of housing infrastructure grant investment to unlock a combined 1,500 homes. Through that partnership, significant strides have been made to progress 13 priority sites in the council's pipeline, and support the council's local plan review.

Homes England has also provided around £800,000 in revenue funding to support the delivery of priority sites. As my hon. Friend will be aware, some of the key interventions that have taken place include: Homes England acting in collaboration with the city council, procuring and jointly leading the production of a city centre masterplan, providing a connected vision for Stoke and Hanley; and a serious delivery plan—I think that is the point—with clear evidence steps for the development of that key strategic corridor.

We have also seen progress on several flagship sites across the city, providing a catalyst for the regeneration that needs to happen and that I know my hon. Friend is working hard to see delivered. Etruscan Square, for example, is a major city centre development to regenerate the former bus station site in Hanley, which has secured outline planning permission for a 300-home mixed-used development, following on from receiving £20 million of Government funding in 2021. The North Shelton opportunity area is a collection of three brownfield sites; through our brownfield land release fund, the council has been rewarded money to remediate the site and make way for up to 50 homes.

To reiterate the point that my hon. Friend made, we need to see that partnership working continue. I urge local leaders to continue to press forward with that ambition across the whole city, and I have impressed on Homes England the need to continue supporting Stoke-on-Trent with the necessary skills, powers and investment needed to bring forward development, including on known complex brownfield sites in Hanley town centre, at the nearest possible opportunity. As my hon. Friend knows, I am committed to working with him and others to ensure that we are utilising all the powers that are already available, or that the Government intend to bring forward, to ensure that we realise the full potential of the city, including powers in relation to compulsory purchase orders, as was referenced.

Despite the previous Administration making a number of unfunded commitments to local authorities and mayoral combined authorities, at October's Budget this Government confirmed that the majority of local growth projects have been protected, and that the UK shared prosperity fund has been extended for another year, providing much needed certainty for places to deliver locally. My hon. Friend will also be aware that Stoke-on-Trent received £56 million towards key regeneration sites across the city through the levelling-up fund, supporting both housing and broader economic development.

**Gareth Snell:** On the point about funding, we got £8 million in the recovery fund, and I am reliably informed by the Minister's Department that this was the second largest recovery fund settlement anywhere in the country. I thank the Department for that, because it is a huge recognition of the financial challenges we have had in the past and a down payment on what I hope and believe to be the interest that the Department will take in Stoke-on-Trent going forward.

**Matthew Pennycook:** I will pass on my hon. Friend's appreciation to ministerial colleagues in the Department who oversaw that decision. He can take as given that the funding awarded is a recognition of the importance we place on revitalising cities such as Stoke-on-Trent.

The Goods Yard is another great example of creating new city centre living opportunities, with new apartments alongside work and leisure spaces and next to the main train station. I look forward to overseeing the opening of that in the coming months. More recently, £6.5 million of additional Government funding has been agreed to support public realm regeneration in Tunstall, Longton, Stoke, Burslem, and Middleport, as part of Stoke-on-Trent's levelling up partnership. In Tunstall, I have been heartened to see the planned artworks to celebrate the town's heritage and brighten up the area.

I will touch briefly on planning reforms. As hon. Members will be aware, the Government consulted on changes to national planning policy, and other changes to the planning system, last year. Having reviewed the available evidence and feedback from the consultation, we published our formal response and a revised national planning policy framework on 12 December.

The revised NPPF supports the role of high streets and town centres, by expecting local plans to create a positive framework for their growth and adaptation. It also expects planning applications for town centre uses—defined as retail, development, leisure, entertainment and more intensive sport and recreation uses, as well as

[Matthew Pennycook]

offices, arts, culture and tourism development—to be located in town centres where possible, to support their viability and inhibit trade from being drawn to other locations.

The planning and infrastructure Bill, which will be forthcoming later this year, will speed up and streamline the planning process to build more homes of all tenures and accelerate the delivery of major infrastructure projects, aligning with our industrial, energy and transport strategies. The Bill will make improvements at a local level, modernising planning committees and increasing local planning authorities' capacity to deliver the type of interventions that I have referenced today and deliver an improved service. It will also support more effective land assembly for development in the public interest by reforming the compulsory purchase process. I know that in many parts of the country—Stoke is a great example of this—fragmented and complex land ownership can be a real barrier to development.

**Gareth Snell:** What the Minister has just said is music to my ears, because this is not just about compiling the land that we know is available for development; it is about the consequential impact of that. If we can bring that land together in Stoke-on-Trent, we will be able to protect our greenfield sites from unnecessary development. The more we can do to put houses in Hanley, the greater our chances are of protecting Berryhill Fields, in the middle of my constituency, which are the green lungs of north Staffordshire.

**Matthew Pennycook:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This Government have a brownfield-first approach to development. In all instances where it is possible, we want to see brownfield development prioritised and

accelerated, and we are making a number of changes to ensure that is the case. These include not only some of the revisions we made to the NPPF, but the proposals that we have outlined in our brownfield passport working paper, which will feed into the development of national development management policies, which we will consult on later this year. All of these interventions are to ensure that, wherever possible, we can get brownfield-led development.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that in many parts of the country that fragmented ownership of land is a real barrier. We want generally to see more coherent land assembly and master planning of large sites to ensure that we can maximise their potential, not least in terms of density and getting the number of homes we need on site. In that way, in many parts of the country, it will be possible to avoid having to look at green belt release, although we are clear that where green belt does need to be released—and grey belt as a priority release within that—that does need to take place to meet local housing targets.

To conclude, I again thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to the House today and for his ongoing engagement. I would like to assure him and the city council that the Government recognise the vital role that Stoke-on-Trent will play in our growth mission. We want to see councils across the country working in collaboration and partnership with the Government to create a sustainable and suitable housing supply for those who live in and commute to town and city centres. I very much look forward to working with him and my hon. Friends to that end.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.27 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Women's Changed State Pension Age: Compensation

[DR ANDREW MURRISON *in the Chair*]

[*Relevant documents: e-petition 700765, Introduce a compensation scheme for WASPI women; and e-petition 660682, Hold a Public Inquiry into state pension age changes for women.*]

2.30 pm

**Dr Andrew Morrison (in the Chair):** We are massively oversubscribed. It is plain that we are not going to get everybody in. I remind those who wish to speak that they should bob. I also ask that, voluntarily, Members restrain themselves to two minutes. If we do that, we will get most people in, but not everybody.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered compensation for women affected by changes to the State Pension age.

It is a pleasure to be able to speak in this Chamber and, as I often do, to draw a very substantial crowd. The genesis of betrayal is trust—the kind of trust that underpins the democratic legitimacy of Parliament and on which the authority of the Executive is founded, and the kind of trust that our constituents, when they send us to this place to exercise our judgment on their behalf, rely upon. Their faith in us is that we will honour what we say we will do and that when we make pledges, they are not empty pledges but are meaningful. When trust is breached and broken, the whole of that legitimacy is undermined.

That is precisely what has happened in the case of the so-called WASPI women—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. I will use the acronym, because it has become a familiar one to any of us who have taken an interest in this matter, as I have over some time, and as have the public. This campaign is a campaign for no less than justice, to restore trust.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): The right hon. Member is speaking eloquently about trust. Does he agree that it is really important for the Government to help us to have trust in institutions such as the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman by adhering to decisions made by it?

**Sir John Hayes:** Although that intervention was not orchestrated by me or choreographed by either of us, it leads me neatly to my next point, because there is an ethical case to be made of the kind the hon. Lady describes, there is a constitutional case to be made, and there is a practical case to be made. In the short time available to me—I know that many others want to contribute to the debate—I will try to make all three.

First, the ethical case is, exactly as the hon. Lady said, about honouring the pledges that were made and fulfilling rightful expectations. Not all expectations and hopes are well founded, but when people have worked all their lives and been told that at the end of their working life, they will be paid a pension at a particular time, it is not unreasonable for them to believe that that will come to pass.

**Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Given that the Government response to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report said that a compensation scheme would be “impractical”, with “significant challenges” and the potential for “unjustified payments”, and that there were significant concerns about the robustness of the Department for Work and Pensions research in 2006, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Government’s position is untenable, given the stark contrast with the way that sub-postmasters were treated?

**Sir John Hayes:** I do agree, and the hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to know that I shall be speaking later in my remarks about the ombudsman’s report and findings, which will bring me to the constitutional matter I raised about the nature of accountability and scrutiny and how Governments are held to account, and whether ombudsmen are meaningful at all if their conclusions are entirely disregarded. He is right to raise that issue.

I want briefly to describe the events that provoked me to challenge the previous Government on this issue when my party held the reins of power. I am not a recent convert to this cause; I made the same argument then—that we needed to recognise the justice of this campaign and act accordingly—but I did so knowing the events that have occurred.

I will not go over things laboriously—because you would not want me to, Dr Morrison, given the number of Members who want to speak in this debate—but essentially, when pension ages were equalised, which was the result of two Acts of Parliament, the notice given to the people affected was inadequate.

I am not an unbridled advocate of the case that every woman who thought that they were going to retire at 60, and then found that they would have to retire at 65, should be compensated. If a woman was young or middle-aged when that happened, there is a fair case that they had time to adjust—they could re-prepare; they could make different plans.

However, if a woman was born in the 1950s and had anticipated retiring in two, three or four years’ time but then had to work up to five years’ longer, it is a very different matter, because many of those women, anticipating their retirement, had prepared for exactly that eventuality. Many of those women, of course, were no longer working. They had ended work to look after elderly parents; they were playing a caring role; or their skills were no longer relevant to the workplace, because they had taken time out of work, first to have children and then, as I have said, to embark on other social responsibilities. These were women who worked hard and had done the right thing, and they are not all, as they are sometimes characterised by their critics, drawn from the liberal bourgeoisie—who, as you know, Dr Morrison, I generally speaking despise.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) *rose—*

**Sir John Hayes:** Having said that, I am happy to give way to the hon. Gentleman. [*Laughter.*]

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The words “liberal bourgeoisie” made me think. I represent the mainland constituency that is furthest away from Westminster, and I will just point out that



[*Jamie Stone*]

this issue affects women from all over the UK, be they “liberal bourgeoisie” or not. In my constituency—that far away—370 people have signed the petition. This issue is huge all over the UK.

**Sir John Hayes:** I meant no slight on the hon. Gentleman. He is right: it does affect women across the whole of the kingdom—and of course, he is much posher than bourgeois, so he could not be slighted by my remark.

**Susan Murray** (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I rise to speak as a WASPI woman myself, and I am very proud to associate myself with this campaign. I know that many people feel that perhaps we should perhaps not be entitled to compensation, because we were able to get mortgages and buy our own homes, we were able to generate more capital wealth, and many of us have private pensions. However, I personally had to stop work because my husband became ill, and I was looking forward to a retirement where my only income would have been the state pension. I am very thankful for my health; I knew that the retirement age had gone up, and when the right hon. Gentleman talks about skills and abilities—

**Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair):** Order. Interventions should be short.

**Susan Murray:** I am sorry, Dr Murrison.

I was able to use my skills and abilities to become a councillor in 2022, and I am now looking forward to a much better retirement. However, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should do a U-turn and implement the ombudsman's recommendation?

**Sir John Hayes:** The hon. Lady's intervention, though not pithy, was pertinent, because she is one of the 3.8 million women, of all kinds and types, who were affected. Many were not well-off; many did all kinds of jobs that could not be described as highly paid; and many found themselves in a position of financial hardship. That is why I stand here today—because this injustice affects all kinds of women, and it has been mischaracterised by some who do not want to face that fact. That makes me angry and righteously indignant, as I always am in the cause of the disadvantaged.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is being very kind in doing so. In Upper Bann and indeed across Northern Ireland, thousands of women feel absolutely betrayed by this Government. Does he agree that those women are in financial hardship today because of that betrayal? It is morally indefensible that not a penny has been made available to these women.

**Sir John Hayes:** Yes, I agree. Some women were forced to carry on working, even when—as an earlier intervention suggested—they were not really in a position to do so, even when they had extra responsibilities, and even when they were not really fit to do so. That is just not acceptable. It is not right; it is not just.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I note the right hon. Gentleman's righteous indignation, but I question where it was in 2016, when the SNP tabled

a motion in support of the WASPI women and he voted against it. Is he not really just a Johnny-come-lately, despite what he said earlier in his speech?

**Sir John Hayes:** I have been in this place a long time, as the hon. Lady knows, and she is here having first been endorsed by the electorate, then rejected, then re-endorsed. I have not had that difficulty myself; none the less, she will know that one learns and grows in this place. As I became more familiar with these arguments—I repeat this—I challenged the Conservative Government, my own party, on this issue, on the record, on the Floor of the House. It is not about this Minister; this is about any Minister who fails to recognise this matter.

**Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir John Hayes:** If I might make a little progress, then I will happily give way.

It is important to set out some of the detail. Some of the worst-affected women received just 18 months' notice of a six-year increase in their state pension age. Just under 2 million women fall into that category. The WASPI campaigners acknowledge that some were going to retire only a matter of days, or perhaps weeks, later than expected, whereas those who were given very long notice were clearly in a rather different circumstance. The campaigners are not unrealistic about that. Having met them and discussed it, I know that they are very realistic about the difference between those two groups, and they therefore simultaneously recognise that the Government response needs to be tailored, and measured in the way it gauges the responsibility. The breach in trust is common, but the effect of that breach in trust is different in different cases.

I do not advocate a response to this problem in which every single case is dealt with individually, so that there are as many different settlements as individuals. That would be impractical and delayed, and I emphasise delay because one of these women dies every 12 minutes. There will be another WASPI woman lost during the course of my speech. That is the reality. These bald statistics mask lives—lives altered, lives damaged and lives restricted by this matter.

**Warinder Juss** *rose—*

**Sir John Hayes:** That is what inspires me to speak today and, I am sure, inspires the hon. Gentleman, who is about to intervene to say just how much he supports me.

**Warinder Juss:** A lot of us have previously publicly supported the WASPI women, including by posting photographs on social media. The Government have acknowledged that there has been maladministration, but to have that acknowledgement without some kind of financial backing, even if minimal, not only undermines the process of the ombudsman, who so many of us rely on, but may undermine public confidence in politicians in general.

**Sir John Hayes:** The hon. Gentleman is right and he encourages me to turn to the ombudsman's report, which I have before me. Members will be pleased to note that, although I have inserted many tags into my copy of this report and the previous one, I will not refer to all of them. That would take forever.

Suffice it to say that the ombudsman found “maladministration in DWP’s communication about the 1995 Pensions Act resulted in complainants losing opportunities to make informed decisions about some things and to do some things differently, and diminished their sense of personal autonomy and financial control.”

The ombudsman’s remedy is set out at the end of the second report. Ombudsmen recommend recompense on a scale—a series of levels, from 1 to 6. The report is here for everyone who has not studied it in detail to see: the ombudsman recommended a level 4 response. That means

“a significant and/or lasting injustice that has, to some extent, affected someone’s ability to live a relatively normal life.”

It suggests that the recompense might be between £1,000 and £2,950.

**Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir John Hayes:** I will in a second.

That suggestion seems to me to be a pretty modest response. It is not extreme, extravagant, unrealistic or unreasonable. It is a modest, measured response borne of the fact that the ombudsman has found maladministration. I have read the two reports. Having been in this House for a long time, been on the Front Bench of my party for 19 years and been a Minister in many Departments, I have rarely seen an ombudsman’s report as clear as this one about maladministration by a Government Department. On that note, I give way.

**Manuela Perteghella:** I thank the right hon. Member for giving way. Does he agree that rejecting the ombudsman’s recommendations for the compensation of WASPI women undermines the role of independent bodies in holding the Government to account? If we cannot rely on the Government to implement such findings, what message does that send to the public about justice and fairness?

**Sir John Hayes:** That brings me to the constitutional point that I said I would make. I have established an ethical case, but there is a constitutional issue about the ombudsman. Over the years, we have developed a number of ways of holding the Executive to account. Parliament does that, of course, but there needs to be other means of doing so on particular and specific issues. That is why the Select Committee system emerged: as a way of studying what the Government were doing and making recommendations accordingly. That is also how ombudsmen began. They are an additional mechanism through which Government can be held to account, but for Select Committees and ombudsmen to have meaning, they must have teeth.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very powerful case. Does he agree that this also undermines our roles as Members of Parliament? As a Member of Parliament, I supported the referral of this case to the ombudsman. Does it undermine our roles if when the report comes back it is just dismissed?

**Sir John Hayes:** Yes. My right hon. Friend is a refined Member of this House. To make a more refined argument in tune with his, I should say that the ombudsman’s

report is, as he suggests, to Parliament. It is for Parliament to discuss, debate and make a decision on. The ombudsman’s report is about Government, but it is, exactly as he describes, to Parliament. I am grateful to him for refining my argument in that way.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I can confirm that my right hon. Friend has campaigned on this issue for a number of years, and not just today. He will know that in July 2022, the Prime Minister—then the Leader of the Opposition—responded to Carol, a WASPI woman who rang BBC Merseyside to raise this issue. The Prime Minister said:

“It’s a real injustice, and we need to do something about it”.

What does my right hon. Friend think he meant by that?

**Sir John Hayes:** Well, it is not for me to second-guess the sentiments of the Prime Minister, but my right hon. Friend is certainly right to say that a number of promises and comments were made. I will talk about them in a little more detail, provoked by his very helpful intervention.

I see in the Chamber today the former shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). He will know that the Labour manifesto in 2019 was fulsome in its support for the WASPI women, promising a generous financial settlement. It is perfectly reasonable to say that parties move on; the new Leader of the Opposition, now the Prime Minister, may have taken a rather different view. He may have taken the opposite view.

**Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir John Hayes:** I will just make this point, and then I will happily give way.

But that was certainly not the impression given by the current Prime Minister’s remarks. He said:

“Justice to end historic injustice”—

that was specifically about WASPI women. The now Deputy Prime Minister said that the Government “stole” the pensions of WASPI women and that Labour would compensate them. Therefore, one can understand why the women, some of whom are represented here today—they are being incredibly diligent and quiet, Dr Murrison, you will be pleased to know—feel that this was indeed a “betrayal”, to use the word that I used at the beginning of my remarks. An expectation was established, and then it was blighted by the decision made since the general election.

**Dr Opher:** I thank the right hon. Member for giving way. Could I make an appeal to all of us? I do not think that either side of this debate has covered itself in glory. I agree that this is a very dangerous precedent about the ombudsman, but let us not make this party political, please. Let us make this about the WASPI women. Is there not a way, at least, of compensating the very worst off among the WASPI women? I would appeal for that.

**Sir John Hayes:** That is a measured intervention, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for it. It is true that a package could be put together and discussed with the campaign group and the women concerned; one would expect Government to do that. As a Minister, I would have had submissions. I have no doubt that this Minister

[Sir John Hayes]

has had them, and the Secretary of State must have had submissions that gave her options, before she said what she said when she let the WASPI women down. Those options would no doubt have included a series of ways through this. I know the Minister will be eager to explore those options with us when he sums up the debate. I have no doubt about that because he is a diligent and decent man; he will not want to betray those women again in what he says today because he is not that kind of character.

**Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The Government's position appears to be that they accept that the failures between 2005 and 2007 constitute maladministration. All of us can see in our inboxes the number of women who, as result of decisions taken on the basis of that failure, suffered as a result. But the Government's position seems to be that there should be no remedy because it would be too difficult to get it right. What kind of justice is that?

**Sir John Hayes:** There are several arguments used by those who do not want to get it right, to use my hon. Friend's term. One is that the public do not care, although all the survey evidence suggests the opposite: that 75% of people think that WASPI women should be treated fairly. Another argument is that it will be too expensive. I could make all kinds of rather spiteful remarks about the Government's decisions about public sector pay, but I will let them stand as a contradiction, without adding to them.

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Member for giving way. He makes a very eloquent and persuasive statement. The current Government use compensation as an excuse, saying it is too expensive, but we have seen, for example, train drivers being given an additional £600 a day. We have seen Government intervene on the Post Office scandal. Does the right hon. Member agree that the argument can be easily disabused by looking at the track record on assistance for those who have found themselves at the forefront of injustice?

**Sir John Hayes:** I had alluded a moment ago to the choices that Government make about how they spend money. Of course it is true that Government priorities will determine where money is spent. The issue is clearly not a priority for the Government. It is difficult, of course: Governments face all sorts of challenges that require investment, and this Government have chosen not to invest in this area. Frankly, it is as plain as that.

**Sorcha Eastwood** (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): Will the right hon. Member give way?

**Sir John Hayes:** With respect, I am going to conclude because I know so many want to speak; I do apologise. [Interruption.] All right, I will briefly give way, but it is the last time.

**Sorcha Eastwood:** I am so grateful to the right hon. Member for giving way and indulging me. I simply want to add to his conclusion. These women have been part of a generation of women who have been discriminated against by statutory provisions over their lifetimes—whether

by the reprehensible marriage bar, the gender pay gap or now this. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would agree. [Applause.]

**Sir John Hayes:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady; I am slightly jealous that I have not managed to attract any kind of applause, but no doubt that will come at the end of my peroration. The hon. Lady is right: that generation of women, born after the war, did not have straightforward lives. That was a difficult time in this country, particularly for women. I talked earlier about their hard work and diligence, and their role as homemakers, mothers and grandmothers. They just deserve better; that is what has driven and inspired me to bring this debate.

I will end on this note. The Minister will not be surprised to hear that I am mindful of the words of Edmund Burke, who said:

"Your representative owes you not only his industry, but his judgement".

In the end, this is a matter of judgment. Do we think the issue matters or do we not? Exercising judgment, I leave him with this further quote, from J.R.R. Tolkien:

"False hopes are more dangerous than fears".

We gave these people false hope. I fear that we will not now put this matter right by realising the rightful hope that they had in thinking they were going to retire at a certain time but then ended up doing so at an entirely different time due to a change of Government policy. That was because of nothing they did, nothing they changed, nothing they chose; it was a change in the law.

I hope that when the Minister sums up he will recognise the strength of feeling across the House, and across this country: that this injustice must be put right, in the name of democratic legitimacy and the trust that I set out at the beginning of my peroration.

2.57 pm

**Rebecca Long Bailey** (Salford) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who—as I know from working with him on other campaigns—is quite the social justice warrior, contrary to popular belief. I fully align myself with the comments he has made. I also welcome the new Minister to his position. We have high hopes for him in this place.

When the ombudsman finally confirmed last year that the Department for Work and Pensions was guilty of maladministration, that these women had suffered injustice and that they were entitled to compensation, we thought that was it—case closed; the next step would be what a redress mechanism would look like. Of course, many felt that the ombudsman's report had not gone far enough, but we had the firm expectancy that the previous Government, and later this one, would at the very least act on the ombudsman's recommendations, as would be the usual course of action.

So when the Government finally issued their response, it was met with shock—shock that despite the clear findings of state-level injustice, these women were to be denied justice; shock that the ombudsman's findings that too many people did not understand their own situations was ignored by the Government; and shock that while, on the one hand, maladministration was accepted, the recommendations of the ombudsman were



rejected in full, without alternative proposals being set out or there being an opportunity to vote or debate the matter in Parliament, as the ombudsman intimated.

There were also fears, as colleagues have stated, that a precedent might now be set on observing an ombudsman's proposals. Usually, when a state-level injustice is found, a Government of the time will act on an ombudsman's proposals or outline their own alternative ones.

**Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): The work the Government are doing to improve transparency and accountability contrasts with what happened under the previous Administration, but does the hon. Lady agree that if they ignore an independent ombudsman's report, it just looks like more of the same to people in my constituency?

**Rebecca Long Bailey**: It is incredibly worrying.

I do not want to test your patience, Dr Murrison, so I will draw my comments to a close by saying this to the Minister. He must be aware that the ombudsman made the rare choice to lay this report before Parliament because it was not reassured that the Department for Work and Pensions would act on its recommendations, and it was right to have that fear. The Minister must understand that although many of us in this place wholeheartedly welcome the Government's apology to the impacted women and acknowledge the difficult financial landscape the Government find themselves in, state-level injustice is state-level injustice. It cannot be ignored, and an apology alone is not sufficient. A remedy must be forthcoming to address the clear and apparent injustice that these women have faced.

3 pm

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): At a rough count, there are in excess of 50 colleagues here from a range of parties. I hope every one of them pledges to join the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women, ably led by the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey).

This boils down to a question of credibility and respect. What credibility and respect can there be for ombudsmen's reports if they are ignored? What credibility and respect can there be for Members of Parliament, ranging from the now Prime Minister to foot soldiers such as me, who parade with placards saying we will fight and campaign on behalf of the WASPI women, if we do not follow through on those commitments?

I want to raise one particular point that bothers me, and then I will let others continue the debate. In trying to justify their policy of inaction, the Government seem to be oscillating between two positions: on the one hand, they keep suggesting that they simply cannot afford to give any compensation at all, but in the next breath they seem almost to be challenging the contents of the ombudsman's report, relying on a dodgy poll that suggests that 90% of the affected women knew about the changes. Well, if the Government can rely on dodgy polls, so can I. I happen to be married to a WASPI woman, and on a dodgy poll of one I can tell the Government that she did not know and did not get a letter, and she has no particular motivation for claiming otherwise, given that it would not have affected her career choices. The Minister needs to be clear when he

sums up: do the Government accept that there was maladministration, as the report sets out, or are they trying to deny that fact?

In paragraph 20 of the report, the ombudsman says:

"While it is unusual for organisations we investigate not to accept and act on our recommendations, we have no powers to compel them to comply. When an organisation does not comply with our recommendations, we can lay a report before Parliament so that Parliament can act to protect citizens' rights."

That is what the ombudsman expects, and that is what the WASPI women have every right to expect too.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair)**: Order. Colleagues will have done the maths. Not everybody is going to get in. I am reluctant to introduce a formal time limit, but you really ought to limit yourselves to two minutes, please. I am sure John McDonnell will be an exemplar.

3.4 pm

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I certainly will, Dr Murrison. I welcome the Minister to his position. I am so pleased that he has been given such an easy policy to resolve as his first task.

Reference has been made to the 2019 manifesto commitment, so let me briefly set it out:

"Under the Tories, 400,000 pensioners have been pushed into poverty and a generation of women born in the 1950s have had their pension age changed without fair notification. This betrayal left millions of women with no time to make alternative plans—with sometimes devastating personal consequences. Labour recognises this injustice, and will work with these women to design a system of recompense for the losses and insecurity they have suffered."

We did that on the basis that those women had paid into the system and been given a date to retire, but had not been given adequate notice. As a result, their life plans were changed dramatically and they suffered consequences. We co-produced a scheme that was expensive—I accept that—and that was going to pay out over a five-year period, but it would have meant that we resolved the matter once and for all. We were not elected, and that scheme never went forward.

When I saw the ombudsman's investigation, I thought that at least something would be done. When the ombudsman's report came out, I was not satisfied with it, but I thought it was at least something. Not having that implemented has crushed people; it has crushed their confidence in the system. I say to my own party, which is now in government, that we need the Government to sit down with the '50s WASPI women and, if necessary, to either implement this scheme or mediate for an alternative, but we need action.

I say to the Minister that this issue is not going away. We are not going away. The women are not going away although, tragically, some of them are dying. This campaign will go on until we secure justice.

3.6 pm

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I am a new Member, and one of the first emails I received was from a WASPI woman. She followed up with a further email, which—to take as little time as possible—I will read out.

[Iqbal Mohamed]

"I need to vent my frustration and anger at the Government's announcement yesterday that they will not accept the ombudsman's recommendation to pay WASPI women some compensation for maladministration. They were in support of this whilst they were in opposition.

As my elected MP, please can you make it known that, as a lifelong supporter of the Labour Party, I am totally disgusted by this volte-face.

I am a WASPI woman who fortunately worked for many years as a teacher and therefore have an occupational pension. I have not been campaigning for myself but for the many women who were in low paid jobs or had caring responsibilities and were not in a position to have a private pension and were therefore relying on a state pension from the age of 60. I understand the equalisation of the ages but, as the ombudsman stated, many women were unaware of the increase in age, in my case two increases. I had one letter about it. Even women who knew about it were often not in a position to 'make appropriate financial adjustments to their planning.'

The people making these decisions are in fortunate positions themselves but I was relying on their understanding and compassion for others who are less able to make up the circa £48,000 which I reckon to have 'lost'.

The government has let WASPI women down. We are not in a great position to protest about this. I am asking you to make the protest on our behalf please."

3.8 pm

**Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I need to say at the outset that my mam is a WASPI woman. Her generation entered into a contract with the state, which the state reneged on and then stole from them.

But this debate is about more than the injustice these women continue to suffer: it is about trust in politicians and our dwindling faith in democracy. I have continually pledged my support to the more than 5,000 women in South Shields who are affected by these changes. These women were as shocked as I was when the Government announced in December that there would be no compensation.

WASPI women do not disagree with compensation for the victims of the contaminated blood scandal, for LGBT veterans and for sub-postmasters, but they do not understand why they are being treated differently. An injustice is an injustice. The PHSO was clear that it is Parliament that needs to make the final decision, yet Parliament has not been allowed to.

I know that deciding on compensation will be complicated and costly, but that is not an excuse. It should not be beyond the realms of any Parliament or Government to figure this out. These women see, as we all do, how the very wealthy and companies profit from our country and do not reinvest in it. Those are the ones who should be paying the price for the economic mess the previous Government left behind, not those who spent their lives contributing. Their fight for fast and fair compensation continues to have my steadfast support, because my words and promises to them, and to the people who sent me to Parliament, matter to me. They put me here, and I will always put them first, because the day I do not, I no longer deserve to be their voice in this place.

3.10 pm

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing this important debate. I will not repeat what so many Members have already said—repetition never makes any argument more persuasive—but the stark fact raised by the right hon. Member is that a WASPI woman dies every 12 minutes, so we will have lost five or six by the time the debate finishes.

As politicians, we have a responsibility and an obligation to act urgently to establish a comprehensive compensation scheme that can be tailored over time. We do not have to raise hundreds of millions of pounds straightaway; that could be done over the lifetime of this Parliament. Such a scheme would recognise the important contribution made by women born in the 1950s, and support the impartial, independent role of the ombudsman, thereby giving it the credence it deserves.

As representatives of the public, we must ensure the principles of transparency, accountability and fair treatment that underpin our democracy. It is time we stood up for this deserving group of women across the country and specifically the hundreds and hundreds from Birmingham Perry Barr who have written to me.

3.12 pm

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing this important debate. I state on record my support and admiration for the WASPI campaign. They have campaigned tirelessly for an acknowledgment of the wrong they face and, crucially, for compensation. I have been pleased to meet many of them on a number of occasions during my time as an MP, and I stand in complete solidarity with them.

The Government have rightly accepted the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's findings of maladministration and apologised for the 28-month delay in writing to 1950s-born women, but what good is that apology if there are going to be no steps towards redress? These hard-working women contributed to the economy, raised families, cared for others and contributed to society in countless ways. They planned their lives based on assurances that the state pension would be available at 60. Instead, they have faced financial hardship, uncertainty and, in many cases, significant distress.

As a result of the previous Government's maladministration, these women have spent the bitter, cold winter rationing their heating because 84% are concerned about soaring energy costs. I know that that reality is faced by people up and down the country, but it is doubly so by WASPI women. What is the cost of failing to address the injustice and leaving thousands of women in financial hardship, without the support they were promised? What is the point of an apology without redress?

Some precedents have been mentioned already for providing compensation where the Government have failed. Those include schemes for Equitable Life investors and for the victims of blood contamination and the Post Office scandal. Even though the scheme was poorly administered, victims of the Windrush scandal have rightfully been awarded compensation for the suffering they endured. Ultimately, the principle has to be the same

and has to apply in this case: the Government made a severe mistake, and thousands suffered as a result, so compensation should be paid.

It goes without saying that the mistake was not made by the current Government, and the blame does not lie at their feet, but unfortunately the responsibility for redress does. There is a strong moral imperative for the Government to accept the ombudsman's recommendation. We have heard during the debate how many WASPI women have died since the campaign began. People voted for a Labour Government that would act in a more compassionate way than their Conservative predecessor, and we still have the opportunity not to let them down.

3.14 pm

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on securing this important debate.

In Epsom and Ewell alone, 5,420 women have been affected by the changes to the state pension age, and their voices echo the sense of betrayal felt nationwide. These women have been wronged, not just by the failure to properly notify them of significant changes to their pensions, but now by this Government's refusal to act on the clear recommendations of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. The ombudsman concluded that there was maladministration by the Department for Work and Pensions dating back to 2005. It found that delays in communication meant too many women did not understand how the changes would affect them. Despite that, this Government have refused to pay any compensation.

A constituent of mine captured the heartbreak that so many feel. She wrote:

"I am absolutely devastated and I feel betrayed. For years, senior Labour representatives and even the Prime Minister himself pledged to deliver fair compensation to those impacted. They have now made a political choice to break that promise and to ignore the findings of an independent watchdog... The Government failed to properly inform women of the changes, and many were plunged into poverty as a result."

Many women were blindsided by the changes, left unable to prepare for the financial shock that followed and plunged into hardship through no fault of their own.

I am proud that the Liberal Democrats have long called for justice for these women. We remain steadfast in our belief that the Government have a moral duty to act in line with the ombudsman's recommendations. The decision to deny compensation sets a dangerous precedent, undermines the role of independent watchdogs and erodes public trust in governance. The Government's refusal to act on the issue is heartless and short-sighted. These women are asking for fairness, for recognition of the injustice they have suffered and for the means to rebuild their lives. I urge the Government to reconsider their position, listen to the ombudsman and do right by these women. It is time we ended this injustice.

3.16 pm

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing the debate, and thank his colleagues from the all-party group.

Many of us believe that the treatment of the WASPI women is profoundly unjust. For over a decade I have stood with local campaigners in my constituency, at rallies and here in Parliament. The merits of their case remain undeniable, and their demand for justice is as compelling as ever. Does the Minister agree that, following the ombudsman's recommendations, we must begin to address this injustice? When an injustice is identified, we surely have a duty to root it out and make it right.

The Conservative party does not have a "get out of jail free" card on this issue. I was in this Chamber when 75 Members debated this issue—so many that some were sitting on the window ledges—and the DWP Minister, the then hon. Member for Hexham, suggested that women who could not make ends meet could take up apprenticeships and retrain. I do not know whether any Members here today were at that debate, but the Minister had to be escorted out of the Chamber by security and put in a service elevator for his own protection.

Sadly, more than 300,000 WASPI women have died since the campaign began. Given that the ombudsman took the extremely rare step of instructing Parliament to act to ensure that the Government issue compensation and an apology, does the Minister not think it right to settle this injustice?

Ministers in this place set the attitude and tone of public bodies. If it is acceptable for the Government to disregard ombudsman decisions on cost grounds, that sets a dangerous precedent. It tells other financially stretched public bodies to ignore any ombudsman recommendations with cost implications, irrespective of the merits and justice of the case.

3.18 pm

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you for chairing this debate, Dr Murrison. I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing it and allowing us the opportunity to speak.

It is truly shocking that the Government were willing to apologise, admit that there had been maladministration and then to say, "Sorry, we're not doing anything about it." The WASPI women have run one of the best campaigns I have ever seen. Imagine this society and economy without the contribution of the WASPI women. These women were told throughout their careers to be quiet, and were told that they were not as valuable as the men who were working with them. These women quietly got on with the job, raised children, looked after parents and worked incredibly hard for less money than their colleagues. These women put so much in, and made these islands what they are today.

The UK Government are sitting there knowing that they wronged this group of women and are unwilling to do anything about it. What would the Treasury's coffers look like if they did not have the £200 billion from equalising the state pension age? Imagine what we have asked those women to put up with throughout their time, and this Parliament is saying to them, "You're still not worth it. You're still not valuable. You still do not deserve compensation, despite the fact that we've wronged you."

The Government know that they are wrong; they know this is the wrong decision. What they need to do now is put it to a vote on the Floor of the House and give every single MP the opportunity to walk through



[Kirsty Blackman]

the Lobbies to make clear their individual views on the actions being taken towards the WASPI women and the principle and administration of compensation. The WASPI women deserve compensation. The Government need to give us a vote.

**Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair):** Colleagues, the wind-ups will begin at 3.28 pm.

3.21 pm

**Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. This is a profound injustice, and one that has shaken the lives of countless women born in the 1950s, who are the very backbone of our society. They have endured hardship, anxiety and financial insecurity because of what the parliamentary ombudsman has unequivocally stated was maladministration by the Department for Work and Pensions. It is indisputably an injustice.

I understand and support this Government's mission to address the mess that was left by what I can describe only as the worst Government in my lifetime. However, the role of a Member of Parliament is not to offer unquestioning subservience to their party. When something is wrong, they have a duty to say so. I cannot and will not abandon these women. As a candidate, I stood beside them, held their banners aloft and pledged my support. I told the WASPI women of Hartlepool that I would always stand by them. That commitment does not and must not end with an election. I will not leverage their support only to walk away once I have their votes.

I count WASPI women as my friends. I pay special tribute to Barbara Crossman and Lynne Taylor, who are in the Public Gallery today, and the countless WASPI women across Hartlepool for their tireless and passionate campaigning. I have supported them for years and am standing with them now. Let us remember what is at stake. This is about not merely compensation, but trust. It is about ensuring that no citizen or generation feels abandoned by the institutions that are meant to protect them. I say to the WASPI women and their supporters that their fight is just, that their voices will not be silenced and that justice delayed is justice denied. Together, we will continue the fight.

3.23 pm

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): In Wales different groups, including 1950s Women of Wales and WASPI, have been working tirelessly to force Government action on pension inequality over many, many years. Unlike Labour in government, Plaid Cymru's support for 1950s-born women has not swayed with the tide. We believe it is inexcusable that the Labour Government have refused the recommendation of their own regulator, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, to provide compensation, and justified that by saying what we have always heard: that the cost would not

“be a fair or proportionate use of taxpayers' money.”

Paper justice—justice without compensation or redress—is an insult to a system that bothers to pretend that the ombudsman's offices can protect the citizen from the incompetence or failures of the state. As things stand,

this is not even a tissue of justice. It is particularly unjustifiable because the ombudsman makes clear in its final report that

“finite resources should not be...an excuse for failing to provide a fair remedy.”

The level of compensation set out by the ombudsman does not go far enough in the first place. It does little to account for the impact, both financial and otherwise, on affected 1950s-born women. Plaid Cymru has consistently supported compensation of at least level 5 on the ombudsman scale: between £3,000 and £9,950. These were women whose voices were not heard during their careers. That is the experience of many of them and many of us. It is a shameful thing that with a Labour Government in power, their voices remain unheard. The impact on 1950s women deserves more than a meagre apology.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member South Holland and the Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing this debate. We have it in our power to have Opposition day debates—there are 20 in a parliamentary Session—and that would be a means of bringing a vote to the Floor of the House; I urge those parties that have it within their gift to bring forward an Opposition day debate to do so, to hear those voices and to have it recorded.

3.25 pm

**Lillian Jones** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for South Holland and the Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on securing this important debate. I have a long record of supporting and have worked closely with the WASPI women, both before and after being elected as their MP. I believed in their cause then, and I still believe in their cause today.

The Government were right to apologise for the delay in writing to the 1950s-born women, and they were right to acknowledge that there are lessons to be learned. Those were important first steps. However, I am very disappointed by the Government's decision not to fully implement the PHSO recommendation to pay compensation. Let me explain why.

Claiming that most 1950s-born women knew that the state pension age was increasing is not accurate. That statistic is from a 2006 survey that referred to a general awareness across the whole population about future changes to the state pension age. It did not ask whether people knew about the specific impact of state pension age changes on them as individuals, and only around 5% of survey respondents were 1950s-born women.

For many, the abrupt change meant they were left with fewer financial resources, longer working years and, in some cases, significant personal distress, especially for women in low-paid jobs. The financial hardship that WASPI women have experienced is a direct consequence of the pension age increase. The parliamentary ombudsman ruled that the national financial challenges should not be a barrier to awarding compensation.

Although compensating WASPI women may not be an easy administrative task, that is not a reason for avoiding action. Government is difficult, but that is not a valid excuse. I am disappointed that the Government decided not to implement all the recommendations of the parliamentary ombudsman, who laid the report before MPs and handed the role of compensating WASPI women to Parliament. That is why WASPI women are so angry.

Every woman has a right to be able to plan for a dignified and secure retirement. I therefore urge the Government to look again at the ombudsman's recommendations, do the right thing and ensure that WASPI women get the financial justice that they so deserve.

**Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair):** Jim Shannon, you have 30 seconds.

3.27 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of the 5,000 WASPI women in Strangford, I beseech the Government to take the right decision and make the just decision for them. It is not just an obligation because of the ombudsman; it is a moral obligation as well. I think of all the women who come to see me and feel—I say this with great respect—let down by the Labour Government. One lady said to me, “I’ve been a member of the union all my life and the Labour party have let me down.” I speak for her and all the others.

3.28 pm

**Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Member South Holland and the Deepings (Sir John Hayes) on securing this really important debate.

When one reflects on there being more WASPI women in the United Kingdom than the population of Wales, it demonstrates how this is a massive issue for this United Kingdom. In my constituency there are 6,930 WASPI women, and there are a similar number in Newton Abbot over the border. There are 7,400 in South Devon. Yet in the Prime Minister's constituency there are fewer than 4,000. I smell a rat. I will give credit to those Labour Members who are here but, just as with the winter fuel payments, we can see that sadly certain members of the Government are choosing, because of the arithmetic around pensioners, to make decisions of an ill-advised nature like this.

In her statement on WASPI women, the Secretary of State talked of the fact that the decision was made by a previous Government, and that that was what WASPI women were really concerned about. The reality is—I hope the Minister will address this; other colleagues have raised it—that the report was about the communications and the impact on women. It was not about a previous decision. So that is what the Government should be addressing.

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): On that point, my constituent Lauraine took early retirement from the NHS in 2014 to care for her husband. She believed that her state pension would kick in in 2015 and support her in her caring responsibilities, since she never received any notification from the DWP to tell her that it would not. She feels angry and let down. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is shocking that the Government can hear testimonies such as Lauraine's and still refuse the fair compensation that these women deserve?

**Steve Darling:** Yes, and my hon. Friend also reminds me of Marilyn in my constituency, who suffered a significant illness and would have benefited from compensation—as would Pam, who cared for two terminally-ill family members. I totally agree with my hon. Friend.

What a baptism of fire this is for the new Minister, but we need him to address the real issues. He must not be wilfully blind to the recommendations of the ombudsman. I would also welcome an explanation why an answer to my named day question, which was named yesterday, remains outstanding.

**Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair):** Commendably brief, if I may say so. I call the Opposition spokesman.

3.31 pm

**Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Con): Thank you, Dr Murrison; it is a pleasure and an honour to serve under my constituency neighbour on, I think, your first day in the Chair. I congratulate all Members who have spoken powerfully and eloquently on behalf of their constituents. I also pay tribute to the those in the campaign, many of whom are in the Public Gallery, silent witnesses to our debate—I honour them for their long campaign for justice.

In particular, I congratulate the new Minister, who I am glad to welcome to his place. Today is his first outing as a Minister, and he has quite a job to do to answer this debate. He is, of course, familiar to us from the media as an independent expert, offering ostensibly impartial advice helpful to the Labour party over many years; I am glad to see him in his rightful place at last. I exonerate him, as a new Minister, for this decision: he did not make it, but has been thrown into it by his party and his boss, the Secretary of State. Perhaps he can change the policy, now that he is new to the role and not implicated in it. Perhaps it was a condition of his accepting office that the Government revisit this topic. I very much hope that that is what we will hear from him shortly.

Particular congratulations, likewise, to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). I honour his long campaign on behalf of women born in the 1950s. It is not only because he loves everything from the 1950s that he is taking this position; he is absolutely right in everything that he said.

The complexity of the matter has been well addressed by the ombudsman and by the Members who spoke today, so I will not revisit the issue in any detail; it reflects the work of a series of Governments over 30 years since the 1995 decision to equalise the retirement age. I was glad to see in the ombudsman's report that the DWP has co-operated fully with his inquiry and I am glad that Ministers and officials respected the ombudsman process.

I am sure this point was made by the Secretary of State in the main Chamber when the decision was announced, but the suggestion that this matter could have been cleared up by the previous Government in consequence of the ombudsman's report is, I think, a little unfair, given that the report came out only two months before the general election was called. It has taken five months for this Government to make their decision—these things are complex. I respect the challenge that the Government have had. I wish we had had time to address it ourselves, but the voters would not have it. This, of course, is this Government's decision.

To address the central issue, the ombudsman found that adequate communications were made throughout the period, but that there was a particular maladministration, as Members have repeatedly mentioned: the delay in

[*Danny Kruger*]

sending out letters in 2005 to 2007. It is good that the Secretary of State acknowledged that maladministration in her response to the ombudsman—I appreciate that and accept it—and that she apologised on behalf of the then Labour Government and the DWP. The fact is, however, while no direct financial loss may have been caused by the maladministration of communication, with a direct change to people's incomes, nevertheless, as we have heard so eloquently from Members, the maladministration—the failure to communicate properly—has caused women to make decisions in ignorance of their true circumstances.

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): Is the hon. Gentleman surprised that the parliamentary ombudsman issued another report this morning damning the Department for Work and Pensions, which she criticised for

“failing to learn from its mistakes”?

She revealed yet another case, of a pensioner who was not told for eight years about a change to their pension that would leave them £3,000 a year worse off.

**Danny Kruger:** The hon. Gentleman highlights the central point here: although, as Members have said, the change of policy itself was not the subject of the ombudsman's inquiry, the failure to communicate directly impacted the circumstances of many women. They did not understand the circumstances they would be in, and it changed the decisions they were making.

**Jim Shannon:** Does the shadow Minister share with me, and I believe with many in this Chamber, what the good book refers to as righteous anger? There is righteous anger today for those elderly people and women who looked towards their retirement as the end of pain and exhaustion. They were unable to plan financially to enable them to retire earlier due to the nature of the communication they were given by Government. Righteous anger deserves justice. Does he agree that the ladies who I and others in this Chamber represent deserve justice? Whether the Minister is responsible or not, he has to give a justifiable yes to what they want.

**Danny Kruger:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I have heard it said that anger is love in the presence of injustice. The righteous anger that so many people feel here in this Chamber and beyond reflects the essential injustice we have seen.

The Government, in their response to the report, made this central defence, which we might hear again from the Minister: they dispute that women were left out of pocket because of the failure of communication made by DWP all those years ago. The Secretary of State argued in the Commons that letters do not have much impact anyway, citing some research suggesting that people ignore letters, do not read them or do not remember receiving them. It begs the question of why Government communicate at all if there is no value to it. It is obviously true that communication of an issue raises awareness of the issue. The failure to communicate meant that awareness of the issue was not possible for these people.

I recognise the challenge faced by the Government here. It is, of course, difficult to assess the precise circumstances of 3.5 million women. I recognise that some of the claims made on behalf of the campaign were exorbitant. Nevertheless, there were many options on the table for the Government to consider, from a hardship fund to smaller packages of support. It was not the only option to give a total no—nothing at all for the WASPI women. That was not the only option.

**Melanie Onn:** Exactly what is the Conservative policy on WASPI women? I have been a long-standing campaigner for WASPI women, voting for the SNP motion in 2016, which the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) failed to attend. It is unclear exactly what the shadow Minister is suggesting. Is he suggesting that there is no plan from the Conservatives for what they would do?

**Danny Kruger:** We do believe there should be justice for the WASPI women. We do believe that an injustice was done and that there should be support offered to them. There needs to be a proper cross-party agreement on this, and I look forward to hearing what the Government have to say on it. We were examining the report ourselves when we were sadly removed from office, when the hon. Lady returned to the House, and I am sure that my party would have come forward with a much better package of support than the Government have—because that would not be difficult, would it?

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman made an interesting point about individuals having the information to plan for their future. Could he therefore comment on why, under 14 years of his party's control of the Department for Work and Pensions, one of the major platforms of its work, the pensions dashboard programme, had to be reset? The costs associated with it increased 23% because it basically went off the rails under his Government's leadership.

**Danny Kruger:** Well, I am afraid to say that often there is maladministration in benefits and welfare, which is the consequence of this vast system that we have. I apologise on behalf of the previous Government if mistakes were made. However, the point is that under the previous Government significant increases were made in both pensions and benefits for pensioners. The state pension rose by nearly £4,000 under the last Government, with an increase of nearly 9% in the last year alone, so I am proud of our record on supporting pensioners.

On behalf of the WASPI women and particularly the campaigners, I would like to reflect their intense disappointment, because the fact is that hope was held out to them by Labour when Labour was in Opposition, including by the now Prime Minister, the now Chancellor and the now Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Who knows? Maybe even the Minister who is here today held out such hope when he was campaigning. Many people voted Labour at the election last year because they believed that justice would be done for the WASPI women, because that is what Labour candidates said would happen. The broken trust that my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings so eloquently referred to is very real.



I would like the Minister to explain why this decision was made, because there was no specific explanation by the Secretary of State when she announced the decision. Was it because the Government could not afford compensation? Was it because of their newly discovered problems with the economy when they arrived in office? If so, could they not afford anything? Nothing? No package at all could be afforded—not even a small one? Or was it because they thought that it was wrong and unfair to compensate the WASPI women, even if it was affordable? If they did think that the WASPI women are owed some money, there can be no question about paying it. Justice demands it; it must be paid. Something else must give way.

I end by making a political point, I am afraid. The fact is that this Government have made a decision not to compensate the WASPI women because they are making payments in all sorts of other directions. There are a lot of discretionary payments being announced by this Government. They have made huge salary increases to train drivers without any reforms to their productivity, they have created an energy company costing billions of pounds that does not make any energy and, most recently, they are paying a foreign country to take off our hands a UK sovereign territory that is vital to the defence of the UK. There are discretionary payments available and it would be interesting to know why on earth they have not made this one. They did not have to act in that way, and I look forward to the Minister justifying why the decision was made and saying what he will do to bring justice for these women.

3.41 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell):** It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Dr Murrison.

I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for securing a debate on this important topic. I also thank him, if slightly less enthusiastically, for its timing, which is on my first day in office. That fact also explains the delay in answering the named day question put by the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), which he referred to in his contribution to the debate.

I am under no illusion that everyone in this Chamber, or almost everyone in this Chamber, will agree with everything that I am about to say. However, all of us who have listened to this debate and to the important points made by right hon. and hon. Members have benefited from it, and we all recognise the context of this debate, which is the squeeze on living standards that has affected women born in the 1950s just as it has the entire country.

The issues that we are discussing today are important to many women, including my aunt in west Wales, who was born in 1955 and who pays particularly close attention to these issues. I spoke to her last night as part of my preparation for this debate and she would agree with the points made by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood), and by my hon. Friend the Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), that women of her generation have faced many difficulties and particular discrimination. People have spoken powerfully about that.

It is therefore right that this debate gives the long-held concerns of those women the consideration they deserve, just as it was right that the Government considered those

concerns in making the decision that we are debating today. That is also why my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds), was the first Minister in eight years to meet WASPI Ltd, why the Government considered the ombudsman's investigations and reports in detail, and why we look closely at what Parliament has said on this subject. Although I understand that the outcome was disappointing for many, the decision was based on the evidence.

Before I set out how we reached that decision, as the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) requested, it is worth reiterating the point that several Members have made: the ombudsman's report was not about the decision in 1995 to increase the state pension age for women, or the decision in 2011 to accelerate that increase. Those decisions were the focus of remarks by many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck). They were taken by Parliament, including by many Members who are here today, and they were upheld by the Court of Appeal in 2020.

**Sir John Hayes:** I welcome the Minister to his place; I appreciate that this debate is his first outing and his comments about the timing are well made. However, the WASPI campaigners have never made that case; they have never said that they were against the equalisation. What they said, and rightly so, is that they were not properly informed and that is precisely what the then ombudsman confirmed in his report. Will the Minister just answer this simple question? The ombudsman said that he felt it was unlikely the DWP would respond to his report—it was sad that he should have to say that. The ombudsman proposed—unusually, in his words—that the matter be laid before Parliament. Will the Minister use his endeavours to ensure Parliament gets to vote on the ombudsman's recommendations?

**Torsten Bell:** We have already had a long statement in the main Chamber. The point of debates like this one today is to make sure that the Government are held accountable for their decisions.

**Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind):** Will the Minister give way?

**Torsten Bell:** I will make some progress and give way later on. There has also been, as has been raised, the opportunity for all parties to call for more time and for votes in the main Chamber. I am sure the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings will take that up with his party in the months ahead. I will make some progress and take more interventions as we proceed.

The ombudsman's investigation concerned the more specific question of how changes in the state pension age were communicated to women, like my aunt, born in the 1950s. The Government started sending personalised letters in April 2009, but the ombudsman concluded we should have started 28 months earlier. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has apologised for that delay. We are determined to learn the lessons so that we avoid similar mistakes happening again. First, we will work with the ombudsman to develop a detailed action plan, identifying and addressing lessons from this and other PHSO investigations. Secondly, we are committed to providing clear and sufficient notice of any changes

[Torsten Bell]

in the state pension age so that people can plan for their retirement. Thirdly, the Secretary of State has directed the Department to develop a clear and transparent communication strategy for state pension changes; work on that has already begun. This will build on changes that are already under way, such as our online “Check your State Pension forecast” service, which provides a forecast of the level of state pension, but also information about when people can take it.

The ombudsman looked at six cases and concluded that DWP provided adequate and accurate information on changes to the state pension age between 1995 and 2004. However, they also found that decisions made between 2005 and 2007 led to a 28-month delay in sending out letters to women born in the 1950s, many of whom are here with us today. The ombudsman said that those delays did not result in women suffering from direct financial loss, but that there was maladministration, and we agree.

**Ayoub Khan:** In spite of what the ombudsman has recommended, it is clear that the current Prime Minister recognised and advocated throughout the country that WASPI women were dealt an enormous injustice. It is a principle of democracy where we advocate for something when we want power, we ought to deliver once we get power to maintain trust and confidence. In spite of what the ombudsman recommends, does the Minister agree that the Prime Minister should honour what he advocated?

**Torsten Bell:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. The Labour party did oppose the acceleration of the state pension age in the early part of the last decade, but he and many other Members will have noticed very viscerally that the Labour party lost many elections since then. Parliament made a decision and the courts have since endorsed that decision. There was maladministration and we must learn the lessons.

**Grahame Morris:** I appreciate that being newly in post is difficult, but can I clarify something? The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger), said that the changes were introduced in 1995—I believe under John Major—but the acceleration of the changes was in 2011-12, under the coalition Government. I think Steve Webb was the pensions Minister. My hon. Friend the Minister says that there was no financial loss, but there must be a financial loss for the women affected. We could argue whether that is justified. We certainly cannot argue that a majority in Parliament passed it. The women must have suffered a financial loss because of having to wait another six years before getting their pension.

**Torsten Bell:** I thank my hon. Friend on two fronts for his intervention. First, because he has reinforced the point that I just made, which was that we are struggling to distinguish between the rights and wrongs of the original decision about the state pension age, the equalisation in 1995, the acceleration in 2011 and the ombudsman's report, which is focused narrowly on the communication of those decisions. On a second front, he reminds us that it was in fact George Osborne who said that the

acceleration of the state pension rises was the single biggest saving that he made. He boasted about it, but that is a separate issue.

**Richard Burgon:** Will the Minister give way?

**Torsten Bell:** I think I should make some progress and give way later. I want to get on to the bit that most Members might not agree with, but at least will explain what we are doing, because we do not agree with the ombudsman's approach to injustice or indeed to remedy. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) rightly noted that is unusual, and it should be unusual. However it is also not unprecedented.

The decision not to introduce a compensation scheme was difficult and complex. The ombudsman assumed, despite evidence to the contrary, that sending letters earlier would have fundamentally changed what women knew and how they acted. However research from 2014 shows that only one in four people who are sent unsolicited letters actually remembers receiving and reading them. The ombudsman does not address this evidence.

**Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab):** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Will he confirm whether the Government's decision and their claim that only 10% of women affected were unaware of the state pension change is based on a survey from 2006 involving just 210 respondents?

**Torsten Bell:** If my hon. Friend will allow me to make some progress, I will come to exactly that point shortly.

There was considerable awareness that the state pension age was increasing. I think everyone agrees on that even if they do not agree about the research itself. The research used by the ombudsman, from 2004, shows that 73% of people then aged 45 to 54 were aware that the state pension age was going up. Further research shows that, by 2006—when the ombudsman finds that the direct mailing should have begun—90% of women aged 45 to 54 were aware that the state pension age was increasing. We therefore cannot accept that, in the vast majority of cases—and I appreciate it is in the vast majority of cases—sending letters earlier would have affected whether women knew their state pension age was rising or increased their opportunities to make an informed decision. It would not be reasonable—

**Sir John Hayes:** I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me for a second time. To be clear about this: there are two issues at stake here—how many women knew, and how communications would have affected that. The fact of the matter is that the ombudsman's report—I have it in my hand—says

“Research reported in 2004 showed that only 43% of all women affected by the 1995 Pensions Act knew their State Pension age was 65, or between 60 and 65.”

That is a clear majority of women who did not know. Therefore the only debate is whether communicating with them would have been effective. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) said, if it would not have been effective, what is the point in Government communicating at all?

**Torsten Bell:** I was not going to go into this detail, but the right hon. Member for South Holland and The

Deepings is inviting me to return to some of my past lives with the details of surveys. The 43% figure that he is referring to refers to all women. What the ombudsman did not do is look at the same survey and look at the women who were affected by this change, who were obviously slightly later in life and much more likely to know about their state pension age. That is where the higher figures I am quoting come from. It is from the same survey as used by the ombudsman, but it is focused on the women who are actually affected by the change.

**Richard Burgon:** I thank the Minister for giving way and I congratulate him on his appointment. However, to get to the crux of this: when the decision our Government have made on this was announced—and there is much to be proud of in what it has done since the general election—my jaw hit the floor. I was flabbergasted. It is my belief that the vast majority of Labour MPs could not believe it when it was announced. That pales into insignificance compared to the reaction of the WASPI women who I and others have been proud to support in my Leeds East constituency and elsewhere. My last point is that, before this decision was made, I said to the WASPI women outside Parliament that justice delayed is justice denied. This is worse than that. I thought I was just trying to compel our Government to hurry up and make a decision. This is not justice delayed is justice denied. As it stands, unless we do something, this is justice denied full stop.

**Torsten Bell:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for his brief congratulations on my appointment prior to his wider comments. I would say gently that he and I both stood on the same manifesto which did not promise to provide compensation, and lots of Members have talked about trust in this Chamber. There was a clear choice not to make that promise in the manifesto.

**Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Torsten Bell:** I really must make some progress because we are about to run out of time.

It would not be a reasonable or fair use of taxpayer money to pay compensation to people whose circumstances would be the same today even if the maladministration had never occurred. A compensation scheme would cost up to £10.5 billion, less than the scheme previously proposed by the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) but still a significant amount.

The ombudsman is clear that, as a matter of principle, redress and compensation should normally reflect individual impact. The Department considered at length whether a tailored scheme could be delivered, but it was simply not a viable option. The ombudsman's report acknowledges the cost and administrative burden of assessing the individual circumstances of 3.5 million women born in the 1950s. Indeed, it took the ombudsman nearly six years to investigate just the six sample cases. To set up a scheme and invite 3.5 million women to set out their detailed personal circumstances would take years and thousands of staff.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): Will the Minister give way on that point?

**Torsten Bell:** I must make some progress.

We also do not believe that paying a flat rate to all women would be a fair or proportionate use of taxpayers' money. I want to address the questions asked by several hon. Members about the specific research findings. It is important to say that the evidence on what women knew about the state pension age changes is robust. The same research was used by the ombudsman, who clearly did not have concerns about its validity.

I have heard hon. Members make powerful speeches today and I understand the strength of feeling on this issue, not least from my aunt. Many women born in the 1950s worked hard in paid jobs, often balancing that with raising a family. The Government have a responsibility to take their concerns seriously, which is why Ministers listened, reflected and carefully considered this complex decision. As custodians of the public purse, however, we must also ensure that decisions are rooted in evidence and are fair to everyone.

The fact remains that the vast majority of women knew that the state pension age was increasing. Even for those who did not, we know that sending letters earlier would not have made a difference in most cases. *[Interruption.]* Although I know that that decision will be disappointing, as we are hearing, and many have been frustrated by watching this debate drag on for years, we believe it is the right course of action. Of course, it is also right that the Government should be held to account for that decision, as is happening today.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I think I am right in saying that it is unprecedented for the Government to reject in its entirety an ombudsman's report and offer absolutely nothing. Those women were led up the garden path in the last election, and before that, by people saying that compensation was going to be paid. The Minister needs to explain why the Government are simply ignoring the plight of those women.

**Torsten Bell:** It is an important issue, and we have been listening to the plight of those women for many years—and rightly so. Important and powerful cases have been made by many hon. Members, but I have set out why the Government have made that decision.

We will continue to help women born in the 1950s and pensioners across the UK by investing a crucial £22 billion into NHS England this year and next, with consequential for the Welsh and Scottish Governments.

**Kanishka Narayan** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

**Torsten Bell:** No, I will not.

The biggest betrayal of our older generations is the state of our health service. We will also boost the state pension by up to £1,900 by the end of this Parliament. As the new Pensions Minister, I know that nothing is more important than providing a foundation for the secure retirement that everyone deserves after a lifetime of work.

3.57 pm

**Sir John Hayes:** I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to today's debate. It has shown that the sense of injustice felt by the WASPI women is shared by Members on both sides of the House of Commons.



[*Sir John Hayes*]

Sadly, however—I am sorry to say this to the Minister—it is not shared by those in the driving seat who are making the decisions.

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way? I will be quick and nice.

**Sir John Hayes**: No—forgive me, but my time is very short.

I sincerely hope that we will get a parliamentary vote on this issue and I will use every endeavour to ensure that we do. The WASPI women deserve better than the explanation we heard today, which was essentially somewhere between, “We’re not sure that their case is justified, because we think that most of them did know,” and, “We can’t afford it even if their case is justified.” Frankly, neither of those arguments will wash. The Minister, who is, as I said earlier, a decent man, must know that, just as the Prime Minister certainly feigned to know it before the general election. The question must therefore be asked, did the Prime Minister not know or did he not care? Was he careless about the support that he offered the WASPI women or did he not know what the Minister has just said?

I end with Winston Churchill, because I can do no better. He said:

“There is no worse mistake in public leadership than to hold out false hopes soon to be swept away. The British people can face peril or misfortune with fortitude and buoyancy, but they bitterly resent being deceived”.

This is deceit—nothing less, nothing more.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered compensation for women affected by changes to the State Pension age.

## Farmland Flooding

4.2 pm

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered nature-based solutions for farmland flooding.

It is great to see you in your place, Dr Murrison. Before I start, I will draw your attention to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: I am a director of a farming company. I do not claim to be a farmer—look at my hands—but I am directly involved in farming and I could benefit from some of the measures that I am proposing.

There are two areas that I want to discuss. The first is the impact of flooded fields on farms and what should be done to help them. The second is the impact of agricultural flooding on other areas of flood risk, and what should be done to incentivise farmers to help ameliorate flooding elsewhere by accepting flooding in some areas of their farms.

Before I go into that, it is necessary to look at the background, and I will give some stats to help paint the picture. Seventy four per cent of the total floodplain in the United Kingdom is agricultural land. That is perhaps no surprise, because centuries of flooding and recession have formed some of our richest agricultural land. In fact, 60% of our best and most versatile land is on the floodplain. As a result, the argument about what should happen with floodplains—whether they should be allowed to flood, be rewilded or be retained for agricultural use—is central to the significant and increasingly political debate about food security.

The incidences of flooding are increasing. We can argue about the reasons behind that, although we do not need to do so today. Last winter, there were more than 1,000 flood warnings for farmland, which was a record high. As any farmer will say, particularly in the east of England, last spring the land was inundated with water. It was impossible for farmers to get on the fields until much later than normal, which had a knock-on impact on sowing and a consequential impact on yield for this year. More recently, we had the new year’s flooding right across the country.

We can see from that pattern, and from a much longer one, which we do not need to go into, that there is now a norm. If we look at the new and updated forecast of the change in our weather patterns that we should experience through global warming, although it is true that it will be warmer and drier in the summers, the expectation, which so far seems to be borne out by reality, is that the winters will be wetter with greater incidences of intense rain, which is the kind of rain that leads to flooding. We need action to fix the changing situation.

The first argument I will make about flooding on farms is that watercourses need to be cleared. Not every drainage needs to be slowed down to prevent flooding elsewhere. Although that is very fashionable—I fear that some of that fashion has found its way into the Environment Agency—it is crucial that drainage that is intended to remove water from productive farmland is cleared regularly, either by the Environment Agency or by it getting out of the way and allowing local farmers to do that on its behalf. Farmland is not free flooding for the Environment Agency. That is a crucial distinction between what the

Environment Agency may have planned for flood defences lower down the watercourse and the necessary requirement that the best and most versatile land continues to be used effectively for food production.

We need to identify potential flood relief, including areas where the quality of the land is less good and where, in negotiation with landowners and farmers, we can identify historical floodplains and, perhaps, flood meadows. One of the few traditional flood meadows that still exists is in my constituency at Sculthorpe meadow, and there is another one on the Wensum. That is part of only 1,100 hectares of traditional flood meadow that still exist in the country. There can be agreements there with the Environment Agency, to take advantage of the funding that is available from central Government, which I will come to in a minute. There is a potential for farmers to benefit from allowing areas of lower-quality land to accept flooding for the benefit of others.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate, which is important not only to rural communities and farmers, but to people living downstream in larger towns. Does he agree that the sort of discussions that he describes need to be held with landowners quite far up the catchment area, towards the top of a large river catchment? For example, for our area in the Thames valley, the ideal position would be that farmers in the Cotswolds or in the northern part of Oxfordshire are consulted about this, rather than farmers further downstream in the central part of Berkshire.

**Jerome Mayhew:** The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. One of the beauties of the environmental land management scheme brought in by the last Government is that it has three stages. There is the in-field sustainable farming incentive, countryside stewardship, which has the in-farm elements, and the landscape recovery tier, which anticipates exactly that—I would describe them as in-valley projects. It is right that we should look right across a watercourse in those discussions, but it needs to be done in consultation with farmers, who should not have this imposed on them by a lack of drainage on the part of the Environment Agency.

Where there is flooding of productive farmland, it is necessary for the Government to build on the farming recovery fund, which was instigated by the last Conservative Government. That provides up to £25,000 a farm for an uninsured loss event. I welcome the Government's announcement that they will provide an additional £10 million to that fund, but that is the start, not the end, of what needs to be done, so that farmers who suffer uninsurable loss to their farmland—their productive livelihood—are compensated.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. I represent Glastonbury and Somerton, and part of my constituency lies on the Somerset levels and moors. Somerset is always at the forefront of flooding. In fact, 91% of Glastonbury and Somerton is agricultural land, so we depend on our farmers to store floodwater on their land to prevent our homes from flooding. Does he agree that we should properly compensate our farmers when they store water on their land, and that we should provide schemes with an extra £1 billion a year, so that

farmers have the resources that they need to provide resilience not only for farming, but to our homeowners and residents across the county?

**Jerome Mayhew:** The hon. Lady is right in concept, in that where there is uninsured loss of productive farmland caused by flooding, the last Government was right to create the farming recovery fund to compensate, at least in part, for those losses. As for flooding by agreement, if I can describe it as that, that happens on the Somerset levels as part of the landscape recovery agreement there—it is called the Adapting the Levels project. That needs to come with sufficient funding under the environmental land management scheme, and I will address wider funding concerns later.

Farms can have a role in minimising flooding, and they can do that in-farm as well as further down the watercourse. But the Government must continue to work with the Conservatives and with the environmental land management scheme, which the previous Government set up, to recognise and support this.

We start at the top of the watercourse. Where available, there is upland peatland restoration. Peat bogs, when they are in good condition, are essentially like giant sponges, not just for water but for carbon storage. When they are in poor condition, the cycle goes into reverse, both for water and for carbon emission. Riparian buffers, which can be planted and maintained next to watercourses, slow the flow of water off the land and absorb a percentage of it.

More importantly and more interestingly—I was about to say for farmers like me, but I am not a farmer—for people involved in farming, there are the in-field developments, which are becoming increasingly mainstream and have developed from the regenerative agricultural movement. They are based around soil management. We always used to describe this as the heavy metal approach—that does not refer to our taste in music, but is instead about plough, drill and till, which has been the “traditional” method of agriculture since the second world war, where the inputs come out of a sack and horsepower is relied on to manipulate the soil.

The problem with that, apart from its very significant impact on biodiversity—that is a debate in its own right—is that this leads to collapsed soil structures and then we need to go into subsoiling. The more metal we use, the more heavy metal we need to use, and that destroys or very substantially limits the ability of the soil to absorb and then retain water. That has the short-term impact of increasing run-off, leading to flash flooding in a way that did not happen when I was a boy. It also has a knock-on impact in the summer. If there is a soil structure that is not capable of absorbing and retaining water in the winter, it becomes water-hungry in the spring and summer, and there is parching in a way that affects yield and costs money in irrigation to compensate for that.

There is a movement called the regenerative or min-till movement, where that approach has been challenged. By minimising the impact on soil—the disturbance of soil through metal—the soil structure can be increased, retained and developed. That creates spaces in the soil in which to absorb water, but it also has a secondary impact, which is the mycorrhizal interaction of live roots. That secures carbon and improves the sponginess of the soil.

[Jerome Mayhew]

All those things are great because as absorption is increased, the speed at which that water is emitted back into the watercourse is reduced. Allied to that is the use of cover crops during the winter. Having live roots in the water and a structure that prevents run-off and soil erosion in the winter is enormously important. There is also contour ploughing—that is, ploughing along the contour, not up and down it, as a matter of course. That is basic physics, but it helps to retain water on the land and slows its emission down into the watercourse. These are all things that the farm can do in-field to help its cause, and also to retain water for lower down the watercourse.

A second option, suitable for less valuable land that is not the best quality or the most fertile, is to accept seasonal water, along the lines followed by a traditional water meadow. Watercourses can be re-wiggled—I am not sure if that is a technical term—to slow down the flow of water in appropriate areas. By accepting floodwater, farmers are able to re-establish traditional meadows, but they need to be compensated because they are giving up productive land, albeit less productive land, to provide a social good. The whole concept of the environmental land management scheme was public money for public good.

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Farmers in the Flit valley in Mid Bedfordshire are concerned that repeated flooding and waterlogging has left large areas of farmland unfit for agricultural purposes. Our farmers are prepared to do the hard yards to put in place nature-based solutions, but does my hon. Friend agree that they need support and certainty from the Government to achieve that?

**Jerome Mayhew:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The basis behind my seeking this debate is to highlight the need for continued, not new, Government support. ELMs is a Brexit dividend. It would be a crying shame if the Government failed to build on the very good work of the last Government, as I will come to in a minute.

ELMs is the flagship scheme. The last Government honoured their commitment to provide £2.4 billion every year, from 2019 onwards, to support the transition from area-based payments to public money for public good. The sustainable farming incentive supports soil quality, water quality, hedgerows, tree planting and riparian buffers. There are also the countryside stewardship scheme, and the landscape recovery scheme which I have already mentioned. Other schemes include the England woodland creation offer and the nature for climate fund. All those schemes back up the transition to nature-based solutions, and allow farmers to recognise and mitigate for changes in rain distribution and intensity. They provide funding for the changes necessary for biodiversity and food production.

**Maya Ellis** (Ribble Valley) (Lab): The hon. Member has rightly highlighted the intricate and technical knowledge required to understand some of the mitigations, so I welcome our Government's commitment to a floods resilience taskforce. Does he agree that it is integral that farmers are involved every step of the way in the development of solutions, particularly because of the changing nature of flooding?

**Jerome Mayhew:** Of course I agree. My message to the Government is that when they are dealing with flooding, particularly through the Environment Agency, they need to do so in collaboration with farmers and get their agreement. If a watercourse is going to be slowed down through a lack of clearance, they need to recognise where that water will end up. Such an intervention does not simply lead to freak flooding on a neighbour's land or even their house; it will have consequences for businesses and food security. The Government need to work in collaboration with farmers and be prepared to pay if the benefit of other people's land is used.

I recognise that, up to now, my entire speech has had nothing to do with the Minister's portfolio because she deals with flood defences. I am sure she has a deep knowledge of farming, but it may not be quite deep enough to answer some of my questions. She will be relieved to know that I am moving on to discuss natural flood management schemes as part of the Government's flood defence budget of £5.2 billion.

The last Government made a step in the right direction, albeit a small one, by allocating £25 million to natural flood management schemes. That amount needs to be increased because the lesson from the initial schemes is that they are relatively cheap but very effective. Why do we not do more of them and build on that Brexit dividend?

That leads me to the scary bit: the Budget. I have real concerns. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs trumpeted his £5 billion over two years to support agriculture, which he says is a record amount. However, it is only the biggest ever amount if you ignore inflation, Dr Murrison, which none of the rest of us can. That £5 billion would need to be £5.8 billion across the two years, and then through the rest of the Parliament, to match the £2.4 billion equivalent from 2019 onwards. So we are already £800 million short over the course of the Parliament.

What happens after 2026? In the Budget, it says that future

“funding pressures on flood defences and farm schemes of almost £600 million”

will require a review into affordability. What does that mean? Does that mean it is the end of ELM schemes? Are we going to cut back on all the nature-friendly farming initiatives? Without reassurance from the Minister, and in particular from the Treasury, farmers look at this and say, “There is a cliff edge at the end of 2026.” There are two years of £5 billion, which is less in real money than they had before, and then a huge fall-off. That is a terrible message, on top of the family farm tax: cuts to nature-friendly farming. Where does this go? That is the opposite of the Labour party's manifesto commitment, which was to an expansion of nature-rich habitats.

Will the Minister commit to the water restoration fund? Yesterday, I served on the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee. New clause 2, which was in the name of the Opposition, including me, would have enshrined the water restoration fund in law, but it was voted down by the Government. That gives me, and farmers, real cause for concern. Will the Minister reassure farmers that post-2027 funding for farming, in particular nature-friendly farming, will be index-linked? Otherwise, it will fall off a cliff. Will she rule out cuts?

Will the Minister allocate—this is perhaps more in her personal remit—an increased percentage of the flooding budget to nature-based solutions? Those have been proven



effective, and they work to compensate farmers who assist in their creation. Will she enable private sector investment in natural capital markets? Get the quangos out of the way. Let them set standards, certainly, but then allow the market in nature credits to flourish. Words in a manifesto do not mitigate flooding or support farmers; long-term funding and long-term incentives do. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.21 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I am delighted to contribute to this debate with the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), although I feel that we are spending more time together at the moment than I am with my own family, what with the Bill Committee and other debates. I look forward to round 3—or is it 4?—tomorrow.

**Jerome Mayhew:** It's our secret.

**Emma Hardy:** It is our secret.

I enjoyed the hon. Gentleman's thoughtful contributions on the importance of using soil in the right way and how farming practices can be updated, which were valuable. As I mentioned to the House last week, and as I am sure people have heard me say before, I am fully aware of the impact of flooding on households, people's mental health and, importantly, farmland. I have deep sympathy with farmers, so much of whose crop has been underwater this season, which has impacted yield.

The storms this winter highlight the urgent need for many of us to adapt to the threats of climate change, not least farmers, who often feel the impact directly. As climate change leads to more extreme rainfall, as has been mentioned, the number of people at risk from flooding and coastal erosion will continue to grow. I therefore want to make it abundantly clear that this new Government are committed to tackling this challenge, which is one of the top five core priorities for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

The good news is that work has already begun. Recognising the significant impact of flooding on farmers, the Government are bolstering England's resilience to flooding by confirming an additional £50 million for internal drainage boards to improve assets. That is on top of the existing £25 million, and takes total investment to £75 million. That transformational investment will put IDBs on a firm footing to deliver their vital role in flood and water management. It will benefit projects that will improve, repair or replace IDB assets, including flood barriers, embankments and, as has been mentioned, the maintenance of watercourses. Projects will reduce risks and impacts from flooding for farmers and rural communities across England. To ensure that we protect the country from the devastating impact of flooding, we are investing £2.4 billion in 2024-25 and 2025-26 to improve flood resilience by building, maintaining and repairing flood defences.

However, I gently point out to the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham that this Government inherited our flood defence assets in the worst condition on record. We have had to come in and deal with the maintenance backlog.

**Sarah Dyke rose—**

**Matt Rodda rose—**

**Emma Hardy:** I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) and then to the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), but I have only six minutes.

**Matt Rodda:** The Minister makes an excellent point. In my area, a major flood prevention scheme in Caversham, which is part of the Greater Reading area, has unfortunately been deferred. However, there is some good news regarding the point that she and the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) made about landowners working together. I visited Kennet meadows and Fobney meadows, and saw three different landowners working together to rewild a flood meadow to enhance the land's ability to soak up water. Much can be done if central Government and local government play a leading role in co-ordinating work with landowners, and build a team approach at a local level.

**Emma Hardy:** That sounds like an excellent example. I note that the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton intervened earlier on the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham so, if she does not mind, I will use the last five minutes of the debate to respond to some of the comments made earlier.

We are looking at reviewing the flood funding formula, which was brought up by farmers during many of the visits that I made when I was in a shadow ministerial position. I want to work with all the various stakeholders on that, and I recognise that, in my opinion, at the moment the flood funding formula disincentivises investment in rural areas. I want to have a serious look at that.

I hate to see an outbreak of, almost, unity—although that is nice to have sometimes—but there is much love among Labour Members for natural flood management, so I welcome the comments made by the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham. The Government champion and support natural flood management, and I am keen to explore how we can encourage more of it, throughout England. I have therefore convened a roundtable on Monday to explore opportunities and challenges in the delivery of natural flood management. It will include experts and those directly involved in the projects, and will help inform our delivery of natural flood management. I look forward to hearing from farming representatives as part of that discussion, and have invited the National Farmers Union, the Nature Friendly Farming Network and the Country Land and Business Association. I am keen to hear how their views can feed into Government work.

As has been mentioned, various natural flood management methods can be used to protect flooded farmland, such as planting winter cover crops, soil management, matching grazing density to the capability of the land, avoiding growing certain crops on steep slopes, and blocking drainage ditches to slow down run-off and create wetland habitats. There will be measures that benefit flood mitigation in all three of the environmental land management schemes: the sustainable farming incentive, countryside stewardship and landscape recovery.

**Jerome Mayhew:** Those are all great projects, but farmers plan long in advance; it is not an 18 or 24-month process, and if the funding runs out in two years and there is no visibility beyond that, how are they expected to invest in these schemes?

**Emma Hardy:** To reassure the hon. Gentleman, the Government are committed to the environmental land management programme and are looking at funding natural flood management on farmland. As I said, we are having a meeting on Monday to discuss, with farmers, what more we can do for natural flood management.

Part of our vision for farming is a sector that recognises that restoring nature is not in competition with sustainable food production—on this point I agree with the hon. Gentleman—but actually essential to it: restoring nature helps food production. We will provide farmers and land managers with the support they need to help restore nature, which is vital to safeguard our long-term food security, support productivity and build resilience to climate change. That means continuing the transition away from payment for land ownership towards payment for delivering public goods for the environment, and continuing to use regulation to require minimum standards that will—importantly—be designed in partnership with farmers, and have sufficient lead-in times for change.

The countryside stewardship scheme already has specific flood resilience options, such as “making space for water”. I also flag that our land use framework will be coming out at some point, and that this year we will introduce new actions with flood mitigation benefits to our combined environmental land management offer, including actions to reduce flood risk, restore and enhance floodplains, and provide better storage of floodwater.

To sum up, I reiterate that the Government are dedicated to exploring ways that nature-based solutions to flooded farmland can be delivered for the benefit of farmers and others. We have already taken decisive action with the first steps to reviewing the outdated funding formula, the creation of the new, multi-agency floods resilience taskforce, and the updating of flood options under the environmental land management schemes. I look forward to continuing to engage with farmers on these incredibly important matters. I am grateful for this important debate, and grateful to have heard the views of Members in the room.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## UK Submarine Fleet

4.30 pm

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK submarine fleet.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. The UK submarine fleet has a long and distinguished record, always at the heart of this nation's deterrence and defence policy. It began in 1900 when the Royal Navy ordered its first five submarines—the Holland class. In 1901, six officers were recruited for the submarine service under the leadership of Reginald Bacon, the inspecting captain of submarines.

Since the early days of the submarine service, Scotland has been at its heart. In 1909, Dundee became home to the 7th Submarine Flotilla. By 1914, the submarine service consisted of 168 officers, 1,250 ratings and 62 submarines, and the fleet was moved to Rosyth in my constituency. Without offending any hon. Members from the great city of Dundee, Rosyth was obviously a much better choice, and it retains a strong role in the submarine story to this day.

The role of the submarine service in world war one should never be forgotten, with five of the 14 Victoria Crosses awarded to the Royal Navy during the conflict being awarded to submariners. Although the focus of naval warfare in world war two is often thought to be the battle of Atlantic, I was fascinated to learn from the excellent podcast “We Have Ways of Making You Talk” with Al Murray and James Holland of the vital role of British submarines in the Mediterranean. For example, HMS Upholder sank around 119,000 tons of enemy shipping. It was commanded for its entire life by Lieutenant Commander Malcolm Wanklyn, one of the most successful submarine commanders of the conflict, who received the Victoria Cross for attacking a well-defended convoy in May 1941.

The cold war saw the submarine fleet play a key part in deterrence and intelligence-gathering capability. HMS Swiftsure, a ship I will come back to later, became famous for her mission to acquire the acoustic signature of the Soviet aircraft carrier Kiev, with her periscope raised just 10 feet underneath the carrier's hull. In the Falklands, HMS Conqueror became the first and, to this day, only British nuclear-powered submarine to engage an enemy ship with torpedoes. After the attacks on the US on 11 September, HMS Trafalgar and HMS Triumph played a vital role in hitting al-Qaeda targets in Afghanistan. Throughout, submarines have had extensive capability and roles assisting UK special forces in their vital missions.

Today, the Royal Navy operates a fleet of nine submarines, with a little over 1,100 submariners. Four are ballistic missile submarines of the Vanguard class that comprise the UK's submarine-based independent nuclear deterrent, along with five nuclear-powered Astute class with the capability of launching Tomahawk cruise missiles at land-based targets and Spearfish torpedoes at maritime targets. The submarine fleet is spread across the UK. Faslane in Scotland is now the home base for the fleet; Devonport undertakes major refit, maintenance and decommissioning; and Barrow-in-Furness is the manufacturing location of both Astute and the next Dreadnought class of submarines.

At Rosyth, Babcock is undertaking work on the submarine dismantling programme—more on that later, as well—and is also a manufacturer of missile tubes for the Royal Navy and the US navy. QinetiQ, also in my constituency, houses world-class scientists, engineers and technicians, who support our men and women on the frontline by ensuring that Royal Navy ships and submarines remain at the cutting edge of technology.

As I have outlined, the role of submarines in history has been varied. Indeed, the flexibility of the fleet is one of its strengths. The role of submarines is necessarily secret, but it is clear that the need for subsurface protection is both critical and increasing. In 2022, the Chief of the Defence Staff, Admiral Sir Tony Radakin, said:

“There’s been a phenomenal increase in Russian submarine and underwater activity over the last 20 years.”

**Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for raising this issue. He talks about the increase in Russian and foreign-state activity in the waters. The role of the Royal Navy and submarine fleet in protecting us from that is vast. I welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State for Defence last week that the joint expeditionary force will now monitor Russia’s shadow fleet in the Baltic. I hope that work extends to the north Atlantic, where there is a massive gap. Our frontline lies in our backyard, just beyond my constituency and my hon. Friend’s.

**Graeme Downie:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In doing research for this debate, I was fascinated to learn about the maritime range that exists off the west coast of Scotland, which is very close to his constituency. He is absolutely right that we need to ensure that our forces are defending our entire coastline, and places such as his constituency are vital to that, as are the whole of the west and north coasts of Scotland.

More recently, we have been aware of the ongoing undersea threat from Russia, most recently in the sabotaging of undersea cables in the Baltic sea. Submarines will clearly play a vital role in combating those efforts by our opponents. That is not to mention the critical role of the UK’s independent nuclear deterrent and maintaining the capability of the submarine force to support both maritime forces and those on land.

With that in mind, I turn to some of the issues faced by our submarine fleet and submariners, and the actions needed to ensure that they remain at the forefront of our armed forces now and in the future, while continuing to make a vital contribution to our economy and skills development.

I have relatives who have served in the Royal Navy, and I know from speaking to them how difficult the life of a submariner can be. Like other parts of the armed forces, the Royal Navy and the submarine service have struggled with both recruitment and retention. The basic salary for a submariner is £25,000, although it can rise to more than £37,000 with bonuses. None the less, the First Sea Lord has warned:

“We are effectively in a war for talent in this country”.

He also said that

“the submarine service...go through significant periods of real social isolation from the people they love...we must ensure the pressures that are inevitably felt by them are mitigated or eased or supported as best we can.”

Will the Minister say what is being done to support submariners and their families, and what more can be done, to ensure that we have an adequate force for the future?

I turn to future capabilities and the question of whether the submarine service has the right equipment to carry out its role. In its excellent January 2024 report “Ready for War”, the Defence Committee included evidence from Dr Rowan Allport of the Human Security Centre, who expressed this concern:

“Even once all seven Astutes are in service, it is questionable whether the force will be able to sustain their current tasks and the additional deployments to Australia and wider region from 2026 onwards.”

What assessment has the Minister made of that? Does she believe that the Astute fleet is able to carry out the role we intend it to have?

The independent deterrent is a vital service for the security of our country, and we must ensure that it is effective now and in the future. The last Conservative Government left a total deficit of £16.9 billion in the equipment plan for 2023 to 2033, of which the defence nuclear enterprise makes up nearly half, at £7.9 billion. In its report on the Ministry of Defence for the new Parliament, published in October last year, the National Audit Office found key risks in the defence nuclear enterprise relating to costs, skills, commercial relationships and delivery to schedule, and it said that those need to be

“carefully managed as DNE activity and spending increase.”

What steps is the Minister taking in the light of the NAO’s findings to ensure that the DNE is delivering effectively and efficiently?

Finally, as the Minister might have predicted—I have raised this in the House many times—I will talk about what progress the MOD is making on submarines that have been retired from service. Since 2023, the Babcock team at Rosyth in my constituency has been undertaking a demonstrator project to dismantle HMS Swiftsure—the ship I mentioned earlier that played such a vital role in the cold war—in a safe and secure way that protects the environment. That will lead to 90% of HMS Swiftsure being reused or recycled and the remainder being safely disposed of. That kind of work is not being done anywhere else in the world, and it currently employs more than 200 people in my constituency.

There are a total of 23 retired submarines—including HMS Swiftsure—currently being stored between Rosyth and Devonport that could be dismantled in a similar way. Given the knowledge and experience needed, along with the highly skilled nature of the roles, there is an opportunity to use the demonstrator project to establish Rosyth as a centre of excellence for submarine dismantling. From answers to written questions, we know two things regarding those 23 submarines: it costs £8.8 million a year to maintain the submarines at Rosyth and Devonport in their current condition, and the whole-life cost of the submarine dismantling project is £298 million.

I have two specific questions for the Minister about those figures. Can she assure me that the cost of almost £9 million a year to maintain those submarines where they are is not slowly reducing the £298 million budget? Will she work with me, Babcock, Fife council, Fife college and other local partners to help to turn Rosyth into the worldwide centre of excellence for submarine dismantling? When will she be in a position to announce the next stages of the submarine dismantling project?



[*Graeme Downie*]

That announcement could be vital for the ongoing success of the defence industry in my constituency and its ability to drive local economic growth and provide secure, well-paying jobs for local people.

In closing, I put on record my thanks to the members of the submarine service, the Royal Navy and all our armed forces for the work they do every day to keep us safe. We are living in an increasingly volatile and unstable world and, sadly, it feels like our armed forces will be required to play an increased role in deterring our opponents and supporting our allies around the world in coming years. This House must be united in supporting our armed forces now and in the years to come.

4.40 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the second time this afternoon, Dr Murrison. There are slightly fewer people at this debate than the last one, but it is equally important. I commend the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for his contribution. He is making a habit of picking subjects that all of us are interested in. I am particularly interested in this one.

Our submarine fleet is of major importance to the Royal Navy. It massively supports our defence role and is critically important for the future. Other countries are building up their fleets of ships, boats and submarines, and, in the interest of our national security, we in the United Kingdom should make sure that we match the demands set by others. It is a pleasure to discuss how we can further protect our security.

The cost of submarines in today's age could be prohibitive to us in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland doing that as one country, but we could do it with other countries in NATO or with Australia, New Zealand, Japan and that alliance across Asia, which is important to have in place because China is incredibly ambitious. Dr Murrison, as your contributions in the Chamber confirm, you know better than most that China is a country with imperial ambitions and a lust for all the things in the world. It is almost like a sponge—whatever it can get, it wants, and it is trying to make that happen across the world.

Back home in Northern Ireland, we do not have our own dedicated submarine fleet, but we do have many people who serve in the UK fleet. We play a fantastic and important role in supporting the central UK fleet in its wider logistical, training and operational functions. I am particularly pleased to see the Minister in her place; I look forward to her response. We will hear shortly from the shadow Minister, who will bring to this debate knowledge from his former role.

Belfast, in particular, has a long history of shipbuilding and of supporting the Royal Navy. In my constituency of Strangford—I am going back a few years to when I was a wee boy in the '60s and '70s in Ballywalter, where we moved in 1959—the tradition was not necessarily the Army, but the Royal Navy. I remember that when I was a young boy, almost everybody who left Ballywalter to go into service went to the Royal Navy. That has changed greatly—fortunately or unfortunately, depending how one looks at it. Today, the tradition is the Army and, to a lesser degree, the Royal Air Force. Very rarely do we have anybody who joins the Royal Navy.

I found an exception when I went to one of my constituents' houses on a Sunday two weeks ago. There was a wake on—we in Northern Ireland have a tradition of going to wakes when someone we know very well has passed away. The young fellow in the house was 19 years old and going into Royal Navy officer training at Dartmouth. He renewed my interest in this subject. He is a really special young boy from the village of Ballywalter who is going to be an officer in the Royal Navy. He has committed his life to service.

The Harland and Wolff shipyard can also play an important part. Lots of things have happened in the last few days in relation to Harland and Wolff; hopefully Navantia, which will take over the shipyard, will promote shipbuilding and submarine work. The shipyard was formerly key to the construction of naval vessels, and in the present day it is an important hub for maritime-related activities, alongside Belfast port.

The hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar is rightly a keen supporter of the submarine dismantling programme, given the benefits it could bring to his constituents. I would expect any MP to do that for their constituents, and he does it well. The Minister has made it clear that, despite the fact that we have had nuclear submarines since the '80s, we have never dismantled one. If she does not mind my saying so, if we are going to look at this matter constructively and seriously, we in Northern Ireland wish to play a part in that work, and I believe that we could. I am not suggesting that we should take the work away from the constituency of the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar; I am just saying that there is a way of bringing us all together, and I think it is important that we do that.

The UK submarine programme faces some challenges with funding, construction delays and technological advancements. Our nuclear-powered submarine fleet is heavily dependent on nuclear propulsion technology, which requires high levels of maintenance and safety oversight. It is important that we are up to speed on that, but it is also important that we look forward to the future. Our defence mechanisms are extremely important, and in continuing to modernise our fleet, we will ensure that we have one of the most capable submarine forces across the world. That is the ambition of the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar, and it is a good one to have. It is an ambition that this Government should have, and it is one that I fully support.

In conclusion, there are ways and means by which every nation in this United Kingdom can play its part in the advancement of our submarine fleet. I look to the Minister for reassurance that that will be taken into consideration in discussions of our fleet, and I look forward to hearing further updates on the dismantlement programme.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair):** I intend to call the Opposition spokesman at 5.8 pm. There are several Members seeking to catch my eye, so brevity is a virtue.

4.46 pm

**Mr Paul Foster** (South Ribble) (Lab): I will be brief, Dr Murrison. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie)

on securing this important debate on what is without doubt one of the most—if not the most—critical elements of our nation's defence. After all, our submarines carry our ballistic nuclear weapons, which are our continual at-sea deterrent.

I have a long-standing passionate interest in the submarine fleet, as they are built by my friends and family in my hometown of Barrow-in-Furness, albeit that is not my constituency. It is true that I could well have entered into a career in building them myself had I not decided to join the British Army instead in 1988. I wish to publicly commend the continued outstanding work of all the personnel within BAE Systems in Barrow in building what are quite possibly the most technically advanced submarines in service. Additionally, I commend our submariners who do a job that I never could—for extended periods, they keep us all safe from those who wish to cause us harm. I am also fully supportive of retaining our nuclear deterrent, as well as the replacement Dreadnought programme.

Looking at the current UK submarine fleet, I have some concerns on a number of issues, but I am aware that it would not be appropriate to raise them all, given the classified nature of operations. As I mentioned, I commend our submariners serving the Royal Navy in an exemplary manner, and I hope that the current recruitment and retention issues being experienced within the service can be addressed quickly. The time that those individuals spend continually at sea is certainly an issue that requires some focus, which I hope it is receiving. The substandard defence accommodation for our serving submariners and their families is also clearly an ongoing issue. The Secretary of State is dealing with that as a priority, and I would appreciate updates as to the progress that has been made.

The UK's next-generation attack submarine, AUKUS, in collaboration with Australia and the United States, is a huge opportunity for not just the shipyard in Barrow but the entire nation. It is pleasing to see that global collaboration with two of our strongest allies, but it also provides a long-term strategic path, along with the Dreadnought programme, for the submarine service to grow from strength to strength and for the United Kingdom to continue to be a leading power in the sector.

**Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to grow the skills necessary to build the service and maintain our submarine fleet? Rolls-Royce Submarines in Derby is doubling the size of its site in preparation for AUKUS, and it has its own nuclear skills academy with 200 apprentices every year. Does my hon. Friend agree that investing in apprenticeships is essential to providing the skills that we need?

**Mr Foster:** I wholeheartedly agree. One of the challenges that we have faced in Barrow over a number of years is losing all the trades and the young people, because previous Governments did not invest in the submarine fleet. Barrow is a small town, but my hon. Friend is right that this is a massive opportunity not only for Derby and Barrow, but for the entire country. I am sure that no one present would disagree that the British Astute-class attack submarine is quite possibly the best there is globally.

I did say that I would be brief, so I will finish soon, but one area that requires much attention—I am aware that the Government are looking at it closely—is submarine

decommissioning and dismantling. My understanding is that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar mentioned, 23 submarines await dismantlement at the Rosyth or Devonport dockyards, with no final solution yet agreed. Furthermore, four Vanguard-class submarines will leave service in the 2030s. I trust that the ongoing strategic defence review is looking closely at the issue.

To conclude, the UK submarine fleet delivers the cornerstone of our nation's defence. Our Royal Navy submarine service should be commended for the unwavering, continued and extremely challenging service that it provides to this country.

4.50 pm

**Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison.

I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) on securing this debate. In his time in the House, he has been a real champion for our submarine fleet. It is an incredibly important subject, and I thank him for his work on it. I am pleased to support him in the debate today.

Some time ago, Admiral Lord West warned that the underfunding of our forces over a number of years has caused them to be “hollowed out”. General Lord Houghton made a similar comment to the Defence Committee in 2023, when he also referred to the “hollowing out” of our armed forces. That has been recognised, but I will also refer to the hollowing out of some of the industrial supply chains on which our armed forces and submarine fleet depend.

We approach the replacement of Vanguard with Dreadnought and, eventually, of Astute—we hope through the AUKUS programme—with a new SSN-AUKUS submarine, for which much of the work will be done in the UK. The design work has already been started by BAE Systems and, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), by Rolls-Royce. This will be a colossal feat of British engineering.

As well as the design work, manufacturing and construction, however, we need to think about the supply chain. Filling the critical supply-chain gaps will be required to ensure that the economic benefit of our new submarine design is achieved. Steve Timms, managing director of BAE Systems Submarines, described this as “a once-in-a-generation opportunity” to boost education, infrastructure and technology. In his words:

“It will sustain thousands of jobs and generate billions of pounds of investment into the middle of the next decade, benefiting every region of the UK.”

We have heard about some of that today.

I will highlight one specific example of how our defence industrial strategy, which we anticipate in the spring, and our industrial strategy must come together to support that: the hull. That is the part of the submarine that keeps our submariners safe, and it is manufactured from steel plate. Currently, that steel plate will be made of slab steel in Scunthorpe, rolled at the Dalzell rolling mill in Motherwell and possibly sent to Clydebridge as well.

Those facilities have suffered some issues in recent years, such as the ongoing issue with the Jingye steel plant in Scunthorpe and whether it will continue, and that of the Liberty steelworks in Scotland. Securing those capabilities

[Chris McDonald]

is important, because although the chemistry of the steel is available, the properties that keep the submariners safe—the strength, the toughness and the ballistic performance of the steel—is all down to the processing of the steel, including the heating and cooling, the chemistry and so on. That is down to the expertise of our steelworkers.

Today, I thank not only our submariners and the communities that support them, but our steelworkers, whose expertise keeps the submariners safe and, as a result, keeps our country safe. As we consider our defence and industrial capabilities, my call is to broaden the scope of our thinking to understand that our sovereign capability runs beyond our immediate defence needs. We must build the capacity, the economy of scale and the skills in our industrial base so that we continue to be a nation that proudly has not only a submarine deterrent, but the skills and capabilities to build and grow that over time.

4.54 pm

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for securing this debate and allowing the House to consider the UK submarine fleet. It also allows me to recognise the importance of the submarine fleet to the UK's defence in the uncertain global circumstances that we face, and the fact that the Royal Navy's entire submarine fleet is based at His Majesty's naval base commonly referred to as Faslane.

Although Faslane is just beyond the boundary of my West Dunbartonshire constituency, it is a major source of employment to my constituents. HMNB Clyde is one of Scotland's largest employers, employing over 6,000 military and civilian personnel directly. Indirectly, some estimates suggest that it supports over 10,000 jobs. It is therefore impossible to overestimate the importance of Faslane to the economy of my constituency, or its strategic importance to the UK submarine fleet.

The fleet currently has nine submarines, with a further two Astute-class attack submarines due to enter service by the end of 2026. Those nine are a combination of five conventionally armed nuclear-powered attack submarines and four ballistic missile submarines of the Vanguard class. In 2009, the previous Labour Government took the welcome decision to base the entire submarine fleet at HMNB Clyde, designating Faslane as their home and developing it as a submarine centre of excellence. I encourage this Government to recommit to investing the funding required to accommodate the evolving submarine fleet as the UK prepares for the Dreadnought class to enter service in the early 2030s. That would continue to safeguard our nation's defences and secure the future of the Faslane base and thousands of jobs for my constituents for a generation.

It was my great privilege and honour to visit Faslane in November with the Scottish Affairs Committee. Our visit included the unforgettable experience of having tea inside an Astute-class submarine with the captain and crew members. We discussed the obvious challenges and concerns about manpower and the potential future skills shortages in the submarine service, which I encourage

the Government to focus on. However, my lasting memory will be of the conditions and how confined it is inside a submarine, with six men to a tiny cabin who are often out at sea for anything up to six months, completely detached from family and loved ones. We ask so much of our vital service personnel and they sacrifice so much to keep us all safe. I thank them for everything they do to keep our country safe in these challenging and worrying times.

In conclusion, I commend the Government for their commitment to maintaining the UK's deterrent beyond 2030, which recognises the benefit to employment and the economy of not only Faslane, but BAE Systems in Glasgow and Rolls-Royce. They are our main industrial partners in the submarine project, supporting tens of thousands of highly skilled jobs in West Dunbartonshire, Scotland and across the UK. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar again on securing this debate.

4.58 pm

**Anna Gelderd** (South East Cornwall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) on securing this important debate.

Our national defence is made possible by the dedication of our people and the strength of our bases across the country, working together to keep the UK secure and our residents safe. The UK's submarine fleet is a cornerstone of that strategy, ensuring national security. Historically, it has played a critical role in defending our nation. In these uncertain times, its importance cannot be overstated. I pay tribute to those brave serving personnel, veterans and their families across our armed forces whose sacrifices make our security possible. Their dedication deserves our utmost ongoing support and respect.

My constituency of South East Cornwall plays a crucial role in our nation's defence. We have a proud military history, with active veterans associations across the area, including in towns such as Saltash, Liskeard and Looe. Torpoint, a wonderful town in my constituency, is home to HMS Raleigh. It has the third highest number of veterans of any community in the country, with over 14% of people having served. HMS Raleigh, as the largest Royal Navy training base in the south-west, equips recruits with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive throughout their careers in the Royal Navy.

Beyond Torpoint, many constituents work across the River Tamar in Plymouth at HMNB Devonport, which is the largest naval base in western Europe. For over 300 years, it has provided vital support for the Royal Navy and continues to play a critical role today. When the Minister gets to her feet, I would welcome her support and recognition of the importance of HMNB Devonport, and of the hard-working and skilled people who make its operations possible.

The armed forces are not only crucial for our national defence, but an essential link to local communities such as those in my area, providing high-quality jobs and a sense of community. The close social and economic ties between South East Cornwall and Plymouth mean that the success and sustainability of HMNB Devonport have a profound impact on the people I represent. I look forward to working with the Minister on this



important topic and to hearing more details about the support for those whose contributions are invaluable to our national defence.

5 pm

**Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) for ensuring that this important debate takes place. I especially wanted to put on the record my support for the Government's nuclear triple lock, which demonstrates our commitment to the strategic nuclear deterrent and the industries that support it. It is really important that countries that might threaten us understand the strong support there is in Parliament for the strategic nuclear deterrent and the role it plays in protecting our country.

The nuclear triple lock commits us to the construction of the four new Dreadnought submarines in Barrow-in-Furness, which supports a huge number of high-quality, high-status apprenticeships and jobs—42,000 in, I believe, 2,500 suppliers across the UK directly and indirectly. The supply chain benefits are felt in every corner of the country. Dreadnought will enable Britain to maintain the continuous at-sea deterrent 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, securing protection for the UK and for our NATO allies, and ensuring that countries that might strategically threaten us understand that, ultimately, we have the protection of the nuclear deterrent. The triple lock also commits us to the delivery of all future upgrades needed for the submarines to patrol the waters and keep our country safe.

The submarine fleet as a whole is a fundamental part of UK defence both militarily and industrially, and is about the integration between those two parts. We have to keep the line of production going in Barrow to produce successive generations of submarines to carry the nuclear deterrent, and in the interim there is the much-needed attack submarines—each generation of SSNs—that we produce in the same facility. The two are dovetailed together, which means that the UK stays at the leading edge of submarine design and manufacturing. I reiterate that this provides extremely high-quality and highly skilled jobs and ensures the economic viability of a corner of the country that would otherwise be economically isolated, quite apart from jobs that extend into other parts of the country, such as in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson).

I welcome the commitment to AUKUS and the opportunities it will bring. AUKUS will create new contract opportunities for hundreds of small and medium-sized firms and 7,000 new jobs in UK shipyards and across the UK supply chain, as well as reinforce our international partnerships with two extremely important allies. I repeat my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar. The debate has been a really important opportunity for a range of Members to reiterate their support for the UK's submarine fleet.

5.3 pm

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the second time today, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) on securing this debate. I am disappointed that we did not somehow co-ordinate so that today the music that so often blares

out on a Wednesday afternoon was “Yellow Submarine”. That song tells of the adventures of a submariner and reminds us to thank all those who serve as submariners in such confined conditions. It is so important that we recognise them, because the UK submarine fleet is critical to national security, economic development and defence of the rules-based international order.

As we have heard, the Royal Navy's submarine fleet comprises nine vessels: five Astute-class nuclear-powered attack submarines and four Vanguard-class ballistic missile submarines. The fleet plays a central role in the UK's defence strategy, providing a continuous at-sea deterrent and contributing to global security through intelligence, surveillance and undersea warfare capabilities, but the submarine fleet faces significant challenges. Issues such as manpower shortages, delays in maintenance and ageing infrastructure risk undermining the fleet's operational readiness, and extended maintenance periods have raised concern about the Royal Navy's ability to meet its current commitments as well as new obligations, such as deployments to Australia under the AUKUS agreement.

The UK submarine industry is critical not only for national defence but as a significant driver of economic growth and skills development. His Majesty's Naval Base, Clyde, known as Faslane and home to the UK's entire submarine fleet, has received over £1.8 billion in infrastructure investments since 2015, supporting over 6,000 military and civilian jobs, and making it one of Scotland's largest employers. In addition, the construction of next-generation Dreadnought-class sub-surface ballistic nuclear submarines and the AUKUS submarine programme is projected to create more than 20,000 jobs across the UK, including, as has been mentioned, 17,000 new roles at Rolls-Royce in Derby. These projects foster expertise in engineering, nuclear propulsion and advanced manufacturing, ensuring that the UK remains at the forefront of global submarine technology. It is essential that we continue to invest in training and apprenticeships to attract young people to this critical sector. Our young people need to develop the skills necessary to carry out these critical projects.

Maintaining the UK's nuclear deterrent is a cornerstone of our national security policy. For over 50 years, the continuous at-sea deterrent has been an unbroken line of defence against nuclear threats. Although I believe that the end goal should be multilateral disarmament, the reality is that the global security environment, which includes threats from state and non-state actors, makes it imperative to retain a robust deterrent.

The AUKUS trilateral security agreement with Australia and the United States marks a significant step forward in international defence co-operation. As part of this partnership, the UK will provide Australia with nuclear-powered conventionally armed submarines based on our next-generation SSN-AUKUS design.

**Luke Akehurst:** Can the hon. Lady confirm something for me? Her remarks suggest that the Liberal Democrats now support the continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, but I remember a review when Nick Clegg was the leader of the Liberal Democrats that suggested scrapping the continuous at-sea deterrent and using coastal-launched cruise missiles, or aircraft operating from aircraft carriers, which I thought was most dangerous. I would be very reassured if it is now the case that the Liberal Democrats support the continuous at-sea deterrent.

**Helen Maguire:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which gives me the opportunity to clarify that we do indeed support the at-sea deterrent, as was confirmed by a motion at conference recently; I cannot remember which conference it was, but it was a few conferences ago.

As I was saying, as part of the AUKUS partnership, the UK will provide Australia with nuclear-powered conventionally armed submarines based on our next-generation SSN-AUKUS design. This not only strengthens our shared security interests in the Indo-Pacific but reaffirms the UK's role as a leading global defence partner. We must ensure that we continue to show our strong support for the AUKUS programme, particularly given potential policy shifts in the United States. Reports suggest that the Trump Administration might renegotiate the AUKUS agreement or deprioritise the commitments that are part of it.

In addition to their role in deterrence and warfare, submarines are critical for safeguarding undersea infrastructure, including the data cables that underpin global communications and commerce. The rise of seabed warfare, particularly by hostile states such as Russia and China, poses a serious threat to these assets, and a robust submarine fleet is essential to protect the UK's interests in this domain.

Finally, we must tackle the long-standing issues in defence procurement. Delays and cost overruns in major programmes have hindered progress in building and maintaining our submarine fleet. A comprehensive industrial strategy is needed to provide a reliable pipeline of equipment procurement. Such a strategy would not only ensure the readiness of the Royal Navy but support the growth of the UK's defence industry.

The UK submarine fleet is a vital component of our national security, our economy and our international partnerships. Although challenges remain, the benefits of continued investment in the sector are evident, and I urge the Government to prioritise the manpower, infrastructure and procurement reforms necessary to ensure that this critical capability is preserved and indeed enhanced for generations to come.

5.9 pm

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure, to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. It is very appropriate that we do so for this debate, given that you are both a former ministerial colleague in the Ministry of Defence and a former surgeon commander in the Royal Navy and the Royal Naval Reserve.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) on securing this debate; it is important and timely, as well as incredibly interesting. Having been the Minister responsible for the nuclear portfolio and the chair of the Defence Nuclear Board, which is a great privilege in the Ministry of Defence, I know that one of the issues with the nuclear enterprise is that there are very few opportunities to talk about it publicly. I see this debate as an opportunity to join others—the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) put it very well—in thanking all those who serve on our submarines, particularly those who have maintained our continuous at-sea deterrent 24/7 since 1969. Theirs is an incredible achievement.

It is also an opportunity to thank all those involved in the whole defence nuclear enterprise, from the First Sea Lord, down to the apprentices who work in

maintenance in Devonport and manufacturing in Barrow, along with contractors in Faslane and elsewhere. It is a huge national endeavour, which I am pleased all parties here now support.

As I said in the previous debate on missile defence, led by the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), there is a key point about the deterrent. In the strategic defence review, we must never underestimate the role of the nuclear deterrent. I do not think anyone here does, but there is perhaps a tendency to take it for granted and therefore talk about all the other incredibly important areas, such as missile defence, the Army, the Navy and so on. To me, nuclear is the most important part of our defence, because no matter what missile defence we have, that is not the reason the Russians will not launch at us. The reason is our ability to retaliate. That is the fundamental fact of our defence. I hope it never comes to it, but it is an extraordinary weapon which we must maintain, especially with the threats that we face today, so it is brilliant to hear so many colleagues showing their support for the nuclear enterprise.

Of course, it does have its challenges. Colleagues have mentioned people and personnel, but I think it is not just about those who serve in the Navy. When I was a Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who was the civil nuclear Minister, and I set up the nuclear skills task force to really inculcate growth in skills in the whole supply chain, whether at AWE or Rolls-Royce, the manufacturer of the nuclear turbines.

There is also the issue of infrastructure. Speaking for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) made a very good point: £1.8 billion has been invested in Faslane since 2015, so there has been significant investment in infrastructure, but when it comes to the nuclear enterprise, the need to invest in infrastructure is huge. It has been a significant factor in some of the issues we have experienced in terms of maintenance and so on. It is vital that the Government bring forward their promise to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence. The Minister and I both agree on that; we both had it in our manifestos. The *Daily Mail* splashed that the target will not be reached well into the 2030s. It would be interesting to hear what the Minister thinks about that speculation. I hope she will refute it 100%, and if not, perhaps she will tell us when we will reach 2.5% or when exactly we will be told the timeline for that.

Finally, on the point of the economic benefit, of course the nuclear deterrent is expensive, but as a percentage of Government spending it is tiny given the ultimate insurance it provides, and it brings a huge economic return. Some have spoken about the importance of AUKUS in terms of jobs and investment. It is going to be one of our biggest ever defence exports. The hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar mentioned Rosyth, which I believe is in his constituency, and the manufacture there by Babcock of the missile tubes. I had the privilege to visit that manufacturing operation. It is one of the best UK examples of extraordinarily skilful manufacturing. The ability to manufacture nuclear submarines, with all their technology, is quite extraordinary and we should be very proud of it. Militarily and economically, it is vital to our country. It is good to see that we are maintaining a consensus today in support of the nuclear enterprise and our submarine fleet.

5.13 pm

**The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle):** I echo the many comments that you have already heard about what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I hope we are providing one of the most interesting of the debates that you have chaired, although having not heard the others, I cannot really have a view on it.

The Government is 100% committed to the UK's independent nuclear deterrent, which keeps both the UK and our NATO allies safe from the most extreme threats. As the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) said, and as my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) made a big point of setting out in his speech, we were elected with a commitment to deliver our triple lock guarantee of maintaining our continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent, constructing four new Dreadnought-class submarines at Barrow-in-Furness, and delivering all future upgrades needed for that programme. I am glad to hear the widespread consensus between all parties represented this Chamber today on that being the right way to go.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie), whose ears must be ringing at the moment with the gratitude from those around him for initiating the debate, which, as the hon. Member for South Suffolk said, is timely and important.

I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar for his ongoing interest in our submarine fleet and the disposal of decommissioned submarines—I am not surprised by that, given his constituency interests, but it still good to hear that he is so passionate about it. I am also grateful to those of his constituents who are among the skilled workers involved in that work at the Rosyth royal dockyard. I would like to echo comments by Members here today who have thanked both our submariners and our industrial workers, who contribute across the nations to this tremendously important enterprise. I am grateful to all of them, whether they serve on board a submarine, serve in our armed forces, or help to build or maintain the submarines, and for all the support work that goes into them.

I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister), who talked about Faslane, my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) who talked about Devonport, and my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South—

**Catherine Atkinson:** Derby North.

**Maria Eagle:** I knew I would get it wrong. My hon. Friend also mentioned the efforts of her constituents in contributing to this national endeavour.

The backlog of 23 decommissioned submarines that have yet to be dismantled and recycled, which has built up over many years—seven are stored in Rosyth and 16 in Devonport—is a longstanding and ongoing issue that needs to be resolved. The previous Government set out on a path to resolve it, and we intend to continue and make sure that that work is done.

While hon. Members should be in no doubt that our submarine capabilities are the envy of the vast majority of countries in the world, the disposal backlog is one of the challenges across the portfolio of the Submarine Delivery Agency that it identified in its most recent annual report, resulting from historic underinvestment

in capability and infrastructure over many years. As a Government, we are committed to defueling, dismantling and disposal of those submarines, and to meeting our responsibilities at every stage of the life-cycle of our fleet. Defueling and disposal are complex tasks, and Ministers, our Submarine Delivery Agency, and our entire defence nuclear enterprise take their responsibilities extremely seriously.

HMS Swiftsure was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar, and workers at Rosyth yard, as he knows very well, are in the process of entirely dismantling it, which is on track to be completed by the end of 2026. That will make HMS Swiftsure the first decommissioned Royal Navy nuclear submarine to be fully dismantled, with around 90% of its structure and components being reused or recycled. This is a demonstrator programme, designed to identify methods of dealing with the backlog of decommissioned submarines swiftly and safely—and, I might say, “surely”, given the name of the submarine, but that is a very corny joke. We intend to do that in a way that provides the best value for money for the taxpayer.

The responsible and innovative approach we are taking has a strong focus on sustainability. By extracting the reactor rather than storing the whole reactor compartment, we are recycling a greater proportion of each submarine and dramatically reducing the volume of radioactive material being placed in long-term storage. We are also ensuring that steel from decommissioned hulls will be able to be reused to support the manufacture of future UK-built submarines.

Workers at the Rosyth yard have also successfully and safely completed the initial stage of the dismantling process on four decommissioned submarines—which should give my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar some reassurance about future work that is going on. That will pave the way to accelerate the programme, having learned, from HMS Swiftsure, the best way of going about it, and should sustain high-skilled jobs in Rosyth as we deal with this legacy.

In parallel, we are evaluating our long-term options for future submarine disposal capability in the UK, using the lessons being learned from HMS Swiftsure, to enable us to dispose of future classes of submarine as they leave service, rather than having to park them at Devonport again and then wonder what to do with them thereafter. The submarine disposal capability project was established in 2022, as I am sure the hon. Member for South Suffolk and you, Dr Murrison, recall, to identify an enduring disposal capability for future submarines. The project is still in its concept phase, assessing all options for a future submarine disposal capability within the UK. An initial study has shown that there were various potential sites for disposal, including Rosyth. That work was investigative.

**Jim Shannon:** I thank the Minister for her very comprehensive response. I am very keen to see that we all realise the potential from the dismantling of the submarines, and I know the Minister is very keen on that, too. Is there any possibility that we in Northern Ireland could be part of that, perhaps through Harland & Wolff and others?

**Maria Eagle:** I am going to have to go back to my officials and interrogate them about what the possibilities are in Belfast. It is not a place where submarine work or nuclear work has previously been done. There will be



[*Maria Eagle*]

criteria that any potential place would have to meet in order to do that, but I will certainly go back and challenge my officials about the extent to which Belfast—

**James Cartlidge:** The Minister makes an important point, because, as she knows, there is essentially a blockage in the infrastructure caused by having all these submarines awaiting dismantling. Will she confirm that she will be looking all over the country for potential places to add capacity? I am sure she agrees it could be immensely valuable economically to those areas that get involved.

**Maria Eagle:** I can, of course, confirm that. We are more than willing to look at any suggestions that any hon. Member might have.

I would like now to try to answer some of the specific questions raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar—it is his debate. He asked specifically about the well-being of submariners, and about what is being done and what more can be done to support them and their families. We are aware of the pressure put on submariners and their families during their long periods of absence. They are given extensive training prior to deployment to try and help to them prepare for life underwater and for life away from their families for such a long time. They have access while at sea to a weekly short message from their nominated loved one, which should help, although it is, of course, not quite like being in the same place at the same time.

When returning from deployment, submariners have access to the Royal Navy family and people support services, which can offer a range of specialist, tailored welfare services if they are needed. Recognising the impact on families, the Royal Navy has also worked to enhance support for families of those deployed, backed by service charities, so there is work there. We are conscious of the extra pressure that exists, and we take steps to try to make sure that there is support and help.

My hon. Friend also asked what assessment I can make of the Astute fleet, and whether it is able to carry out its intended role. The fleet is perfectly capable of carrying out all of the roles that are required of it. As my hon. Friend knows, there are two more Astutes that are not currently commissioned yet—HMS Agamemnon and Astute Boat 7. We will continue to build those, and we expect that the new class to replace Vanguard will also be fully built—certainly, the first boat is currently on target in terms of timing—so we are confident that the fleet can do what it is intended to do.

My hon. Friend also asked what steps have been taken in regards to the NAO findings to ensure that the defence nuclear enterprise is delivering effectively and efficiently. The organisations that make up the defence nuclear enterprise are working more closely than ever before, operating effectively as an integrated team to ensure the maintenance of the continuous at-sea deterrent posture. We are harnessing expertise and experience of multidisciplinary teams to deliver this mission and are committed to sustainment and renewal of the nuclear capabilities for as long as is required. The NAO's work is tremendously valuable to us. It shines a very positive light and focuses minds in the Department and the defence nuclear enterprise on making sure that we do the best we can to get value for money and deliver on time and to budget.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar asked me about the budgets. He discerned from a parliamentary question the £9 million per year cost of maintaining submarines that are awaiting disposal, and he asks whether that reduces the £298 million budget for the major project portfolio data, which he got from a parliamentary answer. Obviously we do not release particular spending profiles for individual programmes, but I can tell him that the latest whole-life cost for the submarine dismantling project is £298 million, and that figure includes costs associated with dismantling work in Rosyth and maintenance costs for decommissioned submarines in Devonport.

My hon. Friend asks if I will work with Babcock, Fife council, Fife College and other local partners to help to turn Rosyth into a world-leading centre for submarine dismantling. He wants a quick announcement on the next stage of the programme. We are currently learning lessons from the dismantling of Swiftsure, which he already knows is on target to be completed by the end of next year. It will pave the way for future dismantling—my hon. Friend knows that there are already four submarines there and that the first stages of the process have already been undertaken for them. Once that work is done and we have finished with Swiftsure, we will look to accelerate the programme in Rosyth, drawing on the lessons we will have learned. That will sustain high-skilled jobs and support sustainability. My hon. Friend will see that we will have made more progress by then on the future of submarine disposal capability.

I am happy to work with my hon. Friend and his local council and other organisations—indeed, we already do. There is a partnership between the MOD, the Royal Navy, and local authorities and nearby universities and colleges called the Arrol Gibb Innovation Campus. Three projects that relate to Rosyth are currently earmarked there for funding. We are more than happy to try to assist in making sure that the local area and his constituents get best value for the money being spent in Rosyth. I hope that answers some of my hon. Friend's questions.

5.28 pm

**Graeme Downie:** I thank everyone who has participated in this debate, from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friends the Members for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), for South Ribble (Mr Foster), for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister), for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) and for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), to the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) and the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge).

It has been welcome to hear a consensus. We talked about the need to ensure that we are supporting our submariners and forces across the Royal Navy and elsewhere. We must continue to ensure that the independent nuclear deterrent is maintained properly, while always recognising the value it has to our local economy. Thank you, Dr Murrison, for your efforts today.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the UK submarine fleet.

5.29 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statement

*Wednesday 15 January 2025*

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Firearms Licensing Fees

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** The Government are today laying a statutory instrument before Parliament that will increase firearms licensing fees to provide full-cost recovery for police forces, giving effect to a commitment in the Government's manifesto.

The fees for firearms licensing applications administered by police forces were last increased in 2015 and they no longer meet the cost of the service provided. It is essential for both public safety and police efficiency that full-cost recovery fees are introduced so that service

improvements can be made. The need to increase fees to help address shortcomings in firearms licensing was highlighted as essential for public safety by the Senior Coroner in his preventing future deaths reports into the fatal shootings in Plymouth in August 2021.

As well as supporting public safety, the increased fees will support police forces to provide an improved service to firearms applicants, through better resourced and trained licensing teams.

The Home Office will conduct more regular reviews of firearms licensing fees in the future, to ensure they keep pace with police costs.

The Government's manifesto commitment refers to the money raised by full-cost recovery fees being used to support youth interventions to prevent serious violence. However, we have decided instead that firearms fees income must be retained by police forces to support improvements in police firearms licensing. Delivering the youth interventions element of the manifesto commitment remains a priority and will be funded by the Home Office.

[HCWS366]





## Written Correction

*Wednesday 15 January 2025*

### Other Correction

**MR GAGAN MOHINDRA**

#### **Artificial Intelligence Opportunities Action Plan**

*The following extract is from the statement on the Artificial Intelligence Opportunities Action Plan on 13 January 2025.*

**Mr Mohindra:** I welcome this action plan, which mentions data centres. As the Secretary of State may be aware, the Deputy Prime Minister is currently reviewing the need for a data centre in Kings Langley in my constituency.

Both the report and the Secretary of State talk about ensuring that the infrastructure is in the right place. I am working alongside my constituents in Kings Langley, because the proposed site is prime green belt. If there is

a need to build on and develop the site, housing would make better sense, because energy—a huge requirement for data centres—is not available nearby. How can the Secretary of State ensure that we are not encouraging the building of white elephants in the wrong places?

[*Official Report*, 13 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 60.]

*Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra):*

**Mr Mohindra:** I welcome this action plan, which mentions data centres. As the Secretary of State may be aware, the Deputy Prime Minister is currently reviewing the need for a data centre in **Abbots** Langley in my constituency.

Both the report and the Secretary of State talk about ensuring that the infrastructure is in the right place. I am working alongside my constituents in **Abbots** Langley, because the proposed site is prime green belt. If there is a need to build on and develop the site, housing would make better sense, because energy—a huge requirement for data centres—is not available nearby. How can the Secretary of State ensure that we are not encouraging the building of white elephants in the wrong places?



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