

**Monday**  
**20 January 2025**

**Volume 760**  
**No. 77**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS**  
**OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**  
**(HANSARD)**

**Monday 20 January 2025**

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# House of Commons

*Monday 20 January 2025*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### House Building Targets

1. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What plans she has to support councils with house building targets. [902241]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** The Government are supporting local planning authorities to facilitate the delivery of more high-quality, well-designed homes, but we know that capacity is a problem with councils and that is why we have also announced a £46 million package of investment to support capacity and capability in local planning authorities, including 300 new planners and support to local authorities with delivering their local plans and green belt reviews. We will also make changes to planning fees so that councils can recover the costs of planning applications.

**Gregory Stafford:** In Waverley and East Hampshire, housing targets from this Government are doubling. When my constituents move into those homes when they are built, the infrastructure and services are simply not there. By “services”, I do not mean a phalanx of civil servants to help them move house; I mean the schools, play areas, supermarkets and road networks. Will the Secretary of State come to my constituency of Farnham and Bordon to see where we need that infrastructure, so that she can understand the implications that her housing targets have for my community?

**Angela Rayner:** We know that we need infrastructure as part of our planning reforms and the mandatory housing targets that we have put forward, and this Government will make sure that that infrastructure is there. I would say to the hon. Gentleman that it was his Government who allowed speculative housing developments, who failed to meet their housing targets and who left people without the houses they desperately needed.

**Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): We have a number of schemes for social housing in Cornwall that rely on the affordable homes programme that ends in 2026. Can the Secretary of State confirm that there will not be a gap in the provision of funding so that the provision of those homes can continue?

**Angela Rayner:** We have set out another £500 million for the affordable homes programme and we will set out further requirements as we get to the spending review.

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

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The increase in housing delivery that the Secretary of State is committed to requires a 50% uplift across the board in housing numbers, yet according to the House of Commons Library, urban and major conurbations have seen an increase of 17% while mainly rural areas are seeing an average increase of 115%. How is that fair?

**Angela Rayner:** The shadow Secretary of State will know that our mandatory housing targets were based on affordability and were introduced to ensure that people are able to get the houses they desperately need. His Government removed the mandatory housing targets, we saw speculative development, and they failed, year on year, to deliver the housing that this country desperately needs. We are going to deliver the houses where they failed.

#### Leasehold Reform

2. **Neil Duncan-Jordan** (Poole) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reform the leasehold system. [902242]

3. **Sarah Hall** (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she plans to take to reform the leasehold system. [902243]

6. **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to reform the leasehold system. [902246]

15. **Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of abolishing residential leaseholds. [902255]

19. **Dr Al Pinkerton** (Surrey Heath) (LD): What steps she is taking to ensure that not-for-profit freeholders are accountable for their management practices. [902260]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** By the end of this Parliament, this Labour Government will have finally brought the feudal leasehold system to an end. On 21 November, I made a detailed written ministerial statement setting out how the Government intend to honour that manifesto commitment, including the steps we will take to implement reforms to the system already in statute.

**Neil Duncan-Jordan:** Every week my constituents in Poole, many of whom are retired, contact me with their concerns about the leasehold properties they live in. They are worried about excessive service charges, unfair ground rent, and exit and event fees. Can the Minister reassure them and me that the Government will tackle those problems once and for all, and will do so as a matter of priority?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I sympathise with the plight of my hon. Friend's constituents. With regard to service charges in particular, we know that opaque and unaffordable charges are putting leaseholders and tenants across the country under immense strain. The Government are

committed to improving service charge transparency and making it easier to challenge unreasonable increases. In the coming months, we intend to consult on how the provisions in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 relating to service charges and legal costs should be enacted, with a view to bringing those measures into force as quickly as possible thereafter.

**Sarah Hall:** Many of my constituents cannot afford to buy their freeholds under the current leasehold legislation. When does the Minister think the legislation to ensure that leaseholders can enfranchise easier, cheaper and quicker will come into force?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I fully appreciate the desire of my hon. Friend's constituents to take advantage of the provisions in the 2024 Act that will make it cheaper and easier for existing leaseholders in houses and flats to buy their freehold. Unfortunately, we discovered on assuming office that the previous Government had passed the Act with a number of specific but serious flaws that prevent certain provisions, including those relating to enfranchisement valuations, from operating as intended. We need to fix those flaws through primary legislation, and we intend to do so at the earliest possible opportunity.

**Anna Dixon:** Earlier this month, together with about 40 Labour MPs, I met the managing director of FirstPort. I raised the case of 90-year-old Tom, who lives in a retirement complex in Bingley in my constituency. Like many of the residents whose stories we shared, he has been hit by extortionate service charges that have risen way above inflation. Does the Minister agree that stronger regulation of managing agents is needed to protect pensioners like Tom and others in leasehold flats from unaffordable housing costs?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We are very much aware that some managing agents provide a very poor quality of service to people like Tom and leaseholders across the country. Managing agents play a key role in the maintenance of multi-occupancy buildings and freehold estates, and their importance will only grow as we transition towards a commonhold future. As such, we have made it clear that we will strengthen the regulation of managing agents to drive up the standard of their service, and we are considering carefully the recommendations made in Lord Best's 2019 report on regulating the property agent sector.

**Mr Joshua Reynolds:** Residents of a housing development in Maidenhead bought their properties 10 years ago on 99-year leases. Now they are coming to sell their flats, they are faced with a charge of £15,000 to £25,000 each to extend their lease so that the new owners can get a mortgage. What will the Minister do directly to help those residents?

**Matthew Pennycook:** In terms of lease extensions, there are provisions in the 2024 Act that will provide some assistance to the hon. Gentleman's constituents. As with other parts of that Act, those provisions, in many cases, require a detailed programme of secondary legislation. In some specific circumstances, we cannot switch on the provisions until we have made the fixes through primary legislation that I referred to in answer to a previous question, but we are working at pace. I am more than happy to have a conversation with him about what we are doing in this area.

**Dr Pinkerton:** Residents living in Mytchett Heath, a retirement community in my constituency, have reported the regular and repeated withholding of invoices, excessive insurance charges and £107,000-worth of maintenance without any supporting rationale. All of this adds up to a 70% increase in service charges since 2020. What is the Minister doing to ensure that not-for-profit companies such as Cognatum Estates, which is, to be very clear, not a social landlord, are held to account? Will he accede to a meeting with me and residents of Mytchett Heath and other Cognatum leaseholders to understand the challenges and anxieties they face?

**Matthew Pennycook:** In addition to the measures I have set out, we intend to proceed with implementing the service charge transparency provisions of the 2024 Act so that residents in all tenures can more easily challenge unreasonable increases. I think complaints about not-for-profit freeholders can be made to the housing ombudsman. I am more than happy to hear more from the hon. Gentleman about the particular circumstances of this case and give him further advice.

**Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con):** I thank the Minister for his reassurance to leaseholders, but what message does he have for freeholders, such as the residents of the Wolds View development in Driffield, who are trapped at the mercy of an unaccountable management company? Will he legislate to protect not just future homeowners but those currently stuck in these contracts?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We are determined to end the injustice of fleecing freeholders entirely, and we will consult next year on legislative and policy options to reduce the prevalence of such arrangements. We remain committed to protecting residential freeholders on existing estates from unfair charges. Similar to my previous answers, we need to implement the 2024 Act's new consumer protection provisions and bring those measures into force as quickly as possible. That is our intention.

## Second Homes: Use Class

4. **Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD):** If she will make it her policy to introduce a new planning use class for second homes. [902244]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** The Government recognise that excessive concentrations of second homes impact on the availability and affordability of homes for local residents to buy and rent, as well as on local services. From April, councils will be able to charge a council tax premium of up to 100% on second homes but, as the hon. Gentleman will know, we do not think this is enough. We are considering what additional powers we might give local authorities to enable them to better respond to the pressures they face.

**Tim Farron:** I am encouraged by the Minister's reply. Towns and communities in my constituency, such as Coniston, Hawkshead, Pooley Bridge and a whole range of other beautiful places, have so many second homes that up to 85% of properties are not lived in for most of the year, meaning that the very survival of those communities is under serious threat. The Government have done a number of things, including talking about

short-term lets being a separate category of planning use. However, will the Minister agree to look at also making second homes a separate category of planning use so that we can prevent these beautiful places from becoming ghost towns?

**Matthew Pennycook:** As the hon. Gentleman will know, the previous Government consulted on making short-term lets a different use class, but did not consult on second homes becoming a use class. As part of our wider consideration about the additional powers we might give local authorities, I am more than happy to have a conversation with him. I understand that the pressures in his part of the world are particularly acute because of both second homes and short-term lets.

#### UK Shared Prosperity Fund: Northern Ireland

5. **Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the UK shared prosperity fund on local communities in Northern Ireland. [902245]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** The UK shared prosperity fund supports people, businesses and communities across Northern Ireland, and is an important part of this Government's local growth funding. The Department is committed to evaluating the impact of the fund, including in Northern Ireland. The UKSPF evaluation strategy is a publicly available document setting out our approach, and the Department is committed to publishing ongoing evaluation findings, as they become available.

**Robin Swann:** The voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland has said that the reduction in shared prosperity funding available in the next financial year, coupled with the increase in employer national insurance contributions, presents a perfect storm at a time when even more is being asked of it. Will the Minister agree to meet me, members of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action and representatives of the voluntary and community sector to discuss those issues?

**Alex Norris:** We inherited a situation in which the previous Government had not made any money available for that work. I have no doubt that the transition year creates significant challenges for local organisations. I have visited the hon. Gentleman in South Antrim before and met representatives of some organisations, and I would be delighted to do so again.

**Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. Cornwall's allocation from the shared prosperity fund is good news and well needed. The Government are reworking the outcomes for the shared prosperity grants, and councils such as Cornwall are awaiting the memorandum of understanding for the grant before they can make agreements with providers. Ongoing schemes need certainty, as employees with three-month notice periods are relying on the contracts, and the old SPF scheme expires on 31 March. Will the Secretary of State confirm—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. That must obviously be connected to Northern Ireland when we look at it.

**Alex Norris:** I know that local authorities from Northern Ireland to Cornwall are interested to know their allocations, information about which was made available to them in recent weeks, and that some have concerns about making spending commitments. The money is there and has been committed, but my officials are working—they have had conversations directly about Cornwall—to ensure that local authorities have the confidence to make those commitments, so that we do not see 90-day redundancy notices.

#### High Street Rental Auctions

7. **Connor Naismith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support local authorities on using high street rental auctions to help regenerate town centres. [902247]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** I am very excited that high street rental auctions are capturing the imagination of local communities and colleagues in this place. A common view for all of us is that vacant shops are a blight and that high street rental auctions are a great tool with which to tackle them. We are working with some early adopters, but I encourage all local authorities to come forward and be active in this space. As of 15 January, we have made a £1.5 million fund available to support the delivery of those powers across the country.

**Connor Naismith:** Crewe town centre, in my constituency, is in desperate need of “new year, new me”. For too long, we simply have not had the tools at a local level to tackle the irresponsible, absent landlords presiding over empty shop units. For example, the old M&S unit is owned by an absent landlord who has left that crucial anchor unit in our town centre to go to rack and ruin. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can remove the obstacles to bringing that crucial unit back into use?

**Alex Norris:** I am sad to hear about Crewe's experience, but I know it is shared up and down the country. Crewe has a proud record in the retail space and I believe it can have that again, but as my hon. Friend says, the right tools and powers must be assembled to make that happen. I would be very happy to meet him. He is slightly unkind, because he knows that Crewe town centre was the site of my biggest personal and professional embarrassment, some 17 years ago. Provided I am still allowed back in, I will very gladly meet my hon. Friend.

**Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Rickmansworth high street in my constituency is a thriving hub for the community, supported by its fantastic local businesses. Having spoken to many of those dedicated business owners, I know the challenges they face. What steps is the Minister taking to support local authorities in delivering initiatives, such as high street rental auctions, to help high streets like the one in Rickmansworth?

**Alex Norris:** We are aware that with new responsibilities for local authorities come new costs. Local authorities want to spend their money as effectively as possible, so we have made £1.5 million available, including to the hon. Gentleman's local authority, to ensure that they have the capacity to make these powers a reality.

### Private Rented Sector: Housing Standards

8. **Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help improve housing standards in the private rented sector. [902248]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** We will deliver on our promise to transform the lives of millions of renters through our landmark Renters' Rights Bill, which will make renting fairer, more secure and more affordable by banning no-fault evictions, ending bidding wars and extending Awaab's law to protect private tenants. I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that it was disgraceful that the Tories decided to play politics last week and tried to vote down this vital Bill, which would have denied renters the protections they deserve.

**Chris Webb:** Recent data shows that 75% of private rented sector properties in Blackpool have damp or mould, leaving tenants to suffer unacceptable conditions. I welcome the Renters' Rights Bill, which will introduce a decent standard for homes in the private rented sector. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that councils have the resources they need to enforce those standards?

**Angela Rayner:** I am sorry to hear of the experience of many of my hon. Friend's constituents. Most private landlords provide a good service to their tenants, but for the few landlords who fail to take reasonably practicable steps to keep their properties free from serious hazards, local councils will be able to issue fines of up to £7,000. That will allow local councils to target their enforcement effectively on the small minority of irresponsible and criminal landlords.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Late last year, Bradenham parish council in my constituency contacted me, concerned that the National Trust, which owns a high number of rental properties in the village, is leaving them empty and not putting in new tenants to avoid the burdens that the Government are placing on landlords. Does the Secretary State agree that there is a balance to be struck here, and what advice can she give areas such as Bradenham, which faces being an empty village?

**Angela Rayner:** The Government have taken action. We will ensure that empty homes are brought back into use. We make no apologies for asking that homes are of a decent and safe standard. People should be able to live in their homes without the risk of hazards that are dangerous to their health.

**Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, one of the big challenges for the private rented sector is the need to house families who are in temporary accommodation. It is very often a five-year tenancy; sometimes it is longer. Such families really should not be in these sorts of homes, which are often overcrowded, leading to damp and mould, whatever the best intentions of the local authority that housed them. In order to improve standards across the board, will my right hon. Friend pledge to ensure that we are pushing for much-needed affordable social rented housing, so that those tenants can move into it, and other private tenants can move into these homes, which will then be improved?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend is right: 160,000 children and families were in temporary accommodation at Christmas. We need to build the social and council homes that we desperately need so that people have a home for life, and stop local authorities spending huge sums of money on temporary accommodation that does not help the life chances of those young people.

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Reform): During the last Parliament, I visited a family in Stanton Hill in Ashfield who lived in a private rented property. It was disgraceful: the property had damp, electrical problems and flooding. Not only was the property covered by the landlord licensing scheme; the landlord was the leader of Ashfield district council. Will the Secretary of State please remind council leaders that if they or their councillors rent out private properties, they should be held to a higher standard?

**Angela Rayner:** The hon. Gentleman highlights an issue across the board: we do not have decent homes standards. We want to introduce them in not just the social rented sector but the private rented sector. We have seen far too many situations where tenants are too frightened to come forward with mould, damp and health issues in their properties. We have to ensure that those standards are upheld. It does not matter who it is or where it is; people should have safe, secure homes.

### Affordable Housing

10. **Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): What steps she has taken with Cabinet colleagues to increase the supply of affordable housing. [902250]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** Our plan for change sets out that the whole of the Government are committed to the biggest increase in social and affordable housing in a generation. The previous Government failed to take social and in particular council housing seriously. I am determined to put right that wrong. We have already taken decisive steps, including an injection of £500 million into the affordable homes programme, our consultation on the rent settlement and reforms to right to buy. We will set out more details in the spending review.

**Deirdre Costigan:** After 14 years of Conservative Government, Ealing council has thousands of families waiting for a council home and has an affordable housing programme that it does not have the money to deliver. A report from Southwark council released on Sunday found that 71% of councils will have to delay or cancel house building projects. Will the Secretary of State look at ways to finally make local councils' housing budgets sustainable so that we can build the affordable homes that my constituents in Ealing Southall desperately need?

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. Since taking office, we have set out a series of measures to support councils to increase their capacity, confidence and motivation to invest in new homes. We are providing £450 million to councils to house some of the most vulnerable in society through the local authority housing fund, as well as injecting an additional £500 million into the affordable homes programme to deliver 5,000 new homes. We are helping councils borrow from the Public Works Loan Board at a reduced cost until the end of 2025-26.

**Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): We need a steady supply of affordable homes as well as homes in the private rented sector. Further to the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), it is easy to sound morally righteous while demanding ever higher standards, but if the housing market is wrecked, ultimately it will be the tenants who pay. Will the Secretary of State answer my hon. Friend's question and tell us how she will ensure that the private rented sector remains investable so that tenants have somewhere to live?

**Angela Rayner:** A balance has to be struck. People needs homes that are safe. Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that they do not want to provide homes of a decent standard? The majority of landlords provide that decent homes standard, and it is a few who do not. Where they do not, they need to be held accountable.

### Local Growth Funding

13. **Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on using local growth funding to help increase economic growth. [902253]

22. **Elaine Stewart** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on using local growth funding to help increase economic growth. [902263]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** Local growth funding is crucial to our growth mission and to tackling regional inequalities. The Government will set out a refreshed approach to local growth funding at the multiyear spending review in the spring. That will end the beauty parades and short-term decision making and put local communities in charge of their own destiny, just as we committed to at the general election.

**Jas Athwal:** Ilford is a hub of regeneration, offering opportunities to independent businesses in new spaces such as Mercato Metropolitano. Ilford has thousands of small and medium-sized businesses that make our high streets more vibrant and offer choice to locals. What are the Government doing to support those businesses so that they can thrive on our local high streets?

**Alex Norris:** As has been a theme of earlier questions, revitalising our high streets is a priority for this Government. We have announced a number of measures, including permanently lowering business rate multipliers for retail, hospitality and leisure properties from 2026-27, introducing high street rental auctions and providing additional funding to tackle retail crime, all of which will support businesses and our high streets.

**Elaine Stewart:** The Ayrshire growth deal, worth over a quarter of a billion pounds, has the potential to stimulate growth and create jobs across the region, yet local delivery of the ambition is slow and stagnant. What message would the Minister send to spark action from the three Conservative-SNP run administrations in the region so that Ayrshire can realise its potential as a world-class business region?

**Alex Norris:** I am sorry to hear that. For our part, the UK Government are working closely with local partners and the Scottish Government to deliver the Ayrshire growth deal, which, as my hon. Friend says, is worth over a quarter of a billion pounds. As part of that, we are supporting a programme review so that, if any strategic changes are needed to ensure that the originally envisaged benefits are realised, they are made. On the message that she asks for, we need to move at pace, exactly as the Government have committed to do, so that the people of Ayrshire get what was promised.

**George Freeman** (Mid Norfolk) (Con): The villages and towns of Mid Norfolk are reeling from the cost of living crisis and the Government's taxes attack on jobs and small businesses. Rather than taxing rural areas and spending the money in the cities, may I suggest that Ministers allow rural councils to keep the proceeds of their growth and incentivise them to support businesses out in our rural communities, rather than allowing the Government to milk rural areas to spend the money in cities?

**Alex Norris:** I cannot accept the hon. Gentleman's characterisation. This Government's decisions—whether on the support going into rural communities and rural policing, or the different business rates reductions—show that we want to support businesses in those communities to thrive, and we will continue to do so.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers. He is a regular visitor to Northern Ireland, and that is because he loves Northern Ireland and wants to ensure that we play our part in the economic boost. Since coming into government, has he had an opportunity to speak to his Northern Ireland counterpart, to ensure that we can go forward together as we should?

**Alex Norris:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind points. I have a strong personal enthusiasm for Northern Ireland—its potential is huge. I speak frequently to Ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive and will continue to do so. As part of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister's reset of our relationship with the devolved Administrations, we meet them regularly and plan together so that our investments and their investments get the best value. I will continue to do that, and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman as well.

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

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): We share the Government's ambition on local growth, but Companies House is reporting the highest level of business closures in 20 years. Will the Government commit to publishing an assessment of the impact that their national insurance rises, business rates rises and changes to business property relief are having on local growth plans?

**Alex Norris:** I have no doubt that the Opposition will have all the information they need to scrutinise the Government of the day—we always provide that with full transparency. What I will not accept is that the sand our economy was built on after the past four years, under the Conservative Government of the shadow Minister and the shadow Secretary of State, is somehow

this Government's failure. In reality, the hon. Gentlemen knows, exactly as we do, that we are fixing the mess that they left. Of course, they will have the chance to oppose us along the way, but we will get on with delivering for the British people, and they will get on with carping from the sidelines. I know where I would rather be.

### Social Housing Providers: Section 106

14. **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): If she will take steps to support social housing providers to fund houses made available under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. [902254]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook)**: I recognise that social housing providers need support to build their capacity and make a greater contribution to affordable housing supply, including via section 106. To assist in that, we have proposed a new five-year social housing rent settlement and permitted councils to keep all their right-to-buy receipts.

**Mr Betts**: I know that my hon. Friend is committed to increasing the provision of social housing. In the past few years, most social housing has been provided through section 106 agreements. According to the National Housing Federation, thousands of houses around the country are available but cannot be purchased under section 106 agreements because registered social landlords simply do not have the resources. I am sure that he is aware of that problem, but does he have any plans to deal with it and bring those houses, which are badly needed, back into use?

**Matthew Pennycook**: The Government certainly recognise the ongoing challenge posed by the reduced appetite of registered providers of social housing to buy affordable homes delivered under section 106 agreements. As I hope my hon. Friend is aware, the Homes England section 106 affordable housing clearing service was launched back in December alongside the revised national planning policy framework, with the aim of supporting buyers and sellers of section 106 homes to find each other more effectively. We are calling on all developers with uncontracted section 106 affordable homes, as well as providers and local planning authorities, to engage proactively with that new service. We will consider what further measures may be necessary to address the problem, informed by data from that service.

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): Private developers in my constituency have obligations to build social homes under section 106, and they are ready to do so. The difficulty they face is that there is no social landlord available to take those units. When I raised this issue with the Deputy Prime Minister in October, she said that she was aware of the problem and was working to tackle it. Will the Minister update the House on the progress made?

**Matthew Pennycook**: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman heard my previous answer, but I have just made it clear that we acted on 12 December to establish a matching service. I would advise him to ask the developers whether they have taken advantage of that service. We want to learn lessons from the data that comes out of it to see whether we need to take further steps.

We think that the matching service will allow registered providers and developers trying to offload section 106 units to come together to see if agreements can be reached.

### Local Government Reorganisation: Devon

16. **Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): What plans her Department has for local government reorganisation in Devon. [902256]

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon)**: On 16 December, I wrote to all councils in two-tier areas and neighbouring smaller unitaries, including in Devon, to set out plans for a joint programme of devolution and local government reorganisation. Later this month, I intend to formally write out to those councils on the shortlist to ask for interim proposals by March and fuller proposals later in the year. We will confirm that as soon as possible, because we know it is important to have clarity.

**Ian Roome**: Obviously, any reorganisation will impact council finances. My constituency of North Devon has coastal towns with real pockets of remote deprivation, isolation and poverty. Now that the Minister's Department has cut the rural services delivery grant, what methodology will be used to ensure that local government funding does not overlook those areas?

**Jim McMahon**: With respect, the hon. Gentleman is conflating two entirely separate issues. One is reorganisation, which will take money away from the back office and put it on the frontline where people can see the benefit of that investment, but to be absolutely clear on rural services, the provisional settlement that was laid out ensures that primarily rural councils get an average increase of 5%, and no council sees a net reduction in its income levels. That is our commitment to rural communities, and it is firm.

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

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a serving councillor on Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council.

Many councils have already undergone significant reorganisation, from moving to shared services right the way through to full unitarisation, and the costs of that have always been underestimated. Although transformation leads to lower long-term revenue costs, we know that councils everywhere are teetering on the edge, so finding funds to pay for reorganisation, transformation and redundancies will be problematic. The mayoral authorities add an extra complication, so can the Minister confirm that funding from central Government will be provided to fully cover both devolution and local government reorganisation, so that councils do not have to factor extra costs into their 2025-26 and 2026-27 budgets or risk reducing local services further?

**Jim McMahon**: The Government are not requiring any area to reorganise. What we did was write out and invite proposals to be submitted, and I pay tribute to councillors across the country for the leadership they have shown in putting those proposals forward. Investment to support LGR or devolution will follow a bit later,

but to be clear, this is a bottom-up reorganisation being requested by local councils, and they have our full support in that process.

### Homelessness

17. **Ruth Jones** (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to work with the devolved Administrations to support people sleeping rough in winter 2024-25. [902258]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** Funding for homelessness services in England is increasing next year by £233 million, taking the total to a record £1 billion. This will help prevent rises in the number of families in temporary accommodation and in rough sleeping. Today, I have announced the tripling of emergency winter pressures funding from £10 million to £30 million. Housing and homelessness is a devolved responsibility, but we engage with devolved Administrations on a regular basis to share best practice and inform our cross-Government strategy on homelessness, which is being chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister.

**Ruth Jones:** I thank the Minister for her answer and welcome today's announcement. Given that young people's experiences of homelessness differ considerably from those of other age groups across all countries in the UK, will the Minister commit to addressing their needs specifically in the homelessness strategy that is coming up?

**Rushanara Ali:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point about the impact on children and young people. It is an absolute scandal that nearly 160,000 children are in temporary accommodation, and we are determined to ensure that the Government's long-term strategy addresses the underlying issues affecting youth homelessness. We are working with mayors, councils and key stakeholders, including in the charitable sector, to get us back on track to ending homelessness.

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

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): St Mungo's has reported a 27% rise in rough sleeping in London under this Government compared with the same period under the last Government. Will this Government commit to removing the ringfences that they have introduced around the homelessness prevention grant, heeding councils' calls to give them back the flexibility they need to get rough sleepers and homeless households into accommodation and avoid the cost shunts they impose on council tax payers?

**Rushanara Ali:** I thank the shadow Minister for his question. The fact is that this Government are investing record amounts of funding to tackle the root causes. That requires action on prevention, and we are working with councils to ensure that we address those underlying causes. We have inherited a mess—record levels of homelessness and rough sleeping—and we are determined to get a grip on it. That means action on prevention as well as addressing the impact of homelessness and rough sleeping, and that is what we are determined to do.

**David Simmonds:** One strategy that councils use to address homelessness is to move homeless households elsewhere in the country. That can be an appropriate response, but it needs to be done in consultation with the receiving authority. Does the Minister share my concern that Labour-led Rushmoor council is using the standards procedure to attack its own members for bringing this legitimate matter of concern to public attention?

**Rushanara Ali:** The shadow Minister will be aware that the shortage of housing is driving out-of-area placements. I am very happy to come back to him on his specific example, but the Deputy Prime Minister has written to councils setting out their responsibilities and that out-of-area placements should be a last resort. We will continue to work with councils to support them as they deal with the challenge of the underlying problem, which is the housing shortage and the crisis that has been left behind. We are determined to ensure that we get a grip by providing the support they need with funding, as well as the 1.5 million homes that this Government are determined to build.

### English Devolution Bill: Local Public Services

18. **Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of the English devolution Bill on local public services. [902259]

20. **Jodie Gosling** (Nuneaton) (Lab): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of the English devolution Bill on local public services. [902261]

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** The English devolution Bill will strengthen public services by delivering local government reorganisation and establishing more directly elected mayors, who will have the new power to convene public services. The Bill will also deliver a new health improvement duty for strategic authorities, and enable more mayors to take on responsibility for police and crime commissioner functions, and health functions as well, to co-ordinate better on local public services. Beyond mayors, the White Paper reasserts the role of local authorities as leaders of place and the delivery arm for the Government's missions.

**Jen Craft:** The catastrophic impact of the level of debt left behind by the previous Conservative council is being felt all over Thurrock. Our services have been cut to the absolute quick, and delivery for residents is at an all-time low. Although I welcome the impact that devolution will have on growth and value for money, what reassurances can the Minister offer that devolution will finally give us the chance to turn the page and deliver where it matters for my constituents?

**Jim McMahon:** That is a shared ambition. The Government are determined to take power away from Westminster and put it into the hands of local communities. We know that driving better outcomes and better public services rests on fair funding, and for too long councils have been impoverished, while more expectations have been placed on them. The funding reforms we are consulting on will be part of rebuilding the foundations, but this is a very significant project to get power away from this place to local communities.

**Jodie Gosling:** English devolution provides a generational opportunity to unlock the potential of towns such as Nuneaton. I thank the Minister for his time and support in ensuring we get these options right. Will he continue to meet me and council representatives to discuss the best options for unlocking growth and opportunity in Nuneaton?

**Jim McMahon:** I thank my hon. Friend and the many other MPs with whom I have had meetings to talk about devolution—at the last tally, about 140 one-to-one meetings with MPs have taken place, such is the interest being shown in devolution for the right reasons. I am more than happy to continue those conversations and to welcome the local leadership being shown.

**Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con):** I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Several Mid Leicestershire villages such as Glenfield, Birstall and Braunstone town are extremely anxious at the prospect of being forced into a large city unitary as a result of the English devolution Bill. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss this matter, and will he give my constituents the assurance that they will not be forced into a city unitary against their wishes?

**Jim McMahon:** It is important to say that any requests for local government reorganisation are proposed to Government by the local areas. It is for the Government to provide the process by which those applications are heard. Over at least the last four years, local authority elections have been postponed countless times to allow reorganisation to take place. To be clear, there is a bottom-up approach for both the postponement of elections and the boundaries that are drawn for the unitaries. Our job is to ensure that the process supports that approach.

**Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD):** I want to ask about the interaction between the planning reforms and devolution, which are two huge bits of legislation. In Tunbridge Wells we have a local plan, but we have been asked when we do our new local plan to have a 66% increase in houses. Except, we will not have a new local plan because Tunbridge Wells borough council will cease to exist—it will become part of the West Kent unitary authority. How will these two huge reforms interact and what will it mean for housing numbers in Tunbridge Wells?

**Jim McMahon:** In a sense, a council is only an organisation at a point in time, but there will always be a local authority responsible for the area. We want to ensure that the authority is strategic but also takes that wider view. Reorganisation is of course part of that, but, importantly, a strategic authority can also take wider responsibility for aligning public service reform with local growth. The hon. Gentleman talks about housing numbers and we can sometimes miss how important that is: housing targets are one thing, but we must not forget that for every one of those numbers there are people and families who currently do not have a safe and affordable place to live. This agenda is about tackling exactly that.

### Planning Reform

21. **Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab):** What recent progress she has made on planning reform. [902262]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** In December 2024 we published a revised national planning policy framework, following extensive consultation. We are also making progress on developing our planning and infrastructure Bill, which will be introduced in the coming months.

**Mary Glendon:** A constituent of mine is endeavouring to prevent her neighbour from building an extension that would affect the rights of access set out in her restrictive covenant. She was initially quoted £80,000 to £100,000 to take the neighbour to court. Such costs make civil law inaccessible to ordinary people. Will the Minister consider looking at ways that restrictive covenants can be brought into the planning process as a material consideration?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I am sorry to learn of the experience of my hon. Friend's constituent. Legal restrictions on properties are not usually treated as material planning considerations; the planning process only addresses whether the development is acceptable in planning terms. Material considerations must relate to a planning purpose such as the character or use of the land. If my hon. Friend wishes to write to me with further details on this, I will endeavour to explore it further.

**Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con):** In Gosport we are facing a massive increase in our housing numbers, and planners are putting in applications to build across the very last green spaces, in the strategic gap between Gosport and Fareham, which already has air quality issues and overstretched local infrastructure. We do have an abundance of disused military sites, however, so what priority is the Minister giving to encourage development on brownfield sites rather than eating up the last remaining green fields in areas such as Gosport, which are already overdeveloped?

**Matthew Pennycook:** The Government have a “brownfield first” approach to development. We strengthened that approach in the recently revised national planning policy framework. We also published last year a brownfield passport working paper to explore further ways in which we might prioritise and accelerate the release of brownfield land. On plan making, we are asking local authorities to take a sequential approach—brownfield first, densify those brownfield sites if possible and work cross-boundary where possible, and only then explore grey belt release and greenfield release in extremis. We are in conversation with Departments across the board about how we can best optimise the use of public sector land across all Departments.

### Topical Questions

T1. [902266] **Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** No one in Britain today should face the cold and indignity of having to sleep in a doorway, so the Minister for Homelessness and Democracy, my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali), has today announced the tripling of the rough sleeping winter pressures fund.

This will ensure that as many people as possible have access to a safe roof over their head and a warm bed to sleep in.

**Frank McNally:** Safety experts have raised concerns about 95 high-rise blocks and nearly 300 other buildings in Scotland found to contain high pressure laminate panels. Shockingly, eight years on from Grenfell the Scottish Government have spent less than 10% of the £97 million received from the UK Government for dealing with cladding in 2020. Does the Minister agree that the Scottish Government have dragged their feet on this for far too long and must act now to make these buildings safe?

**Angela Rayner:** I agree that remediation has been too slow. This Government are laser-focused on speeding up the remediation of dangerous buildings, and I encourage the Scottish Government, for which this is a devolved matter, to increase their efforts, as we are, to up the pace of remediation in Scotland.

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

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that everyone should be treated equally and be seen to be treated equally before the law, including planning law?

**Angela Rayner:** I do not know where the shadow Secretary of State is going with this, but yes, I think people should be treated equally.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** Great. Why, then, is it that the Secretary of State, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have all intervened in the planning application for the Chinese super-embassy, overriding the wishes and concerns of local residents, the local planning authority, the Metropolitan police, the security services and, most likely, the incoming US President?

**Angela Rayner:** These are live issues, but the security of our country and nation always comes foremost, and that is always what this Government think of first.

T2. [902267] **Dr Marie Tidball** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Constituents of mine in High Green were told that a social housing repair project for their home would take 12 weeks. The project has now been ongoing for 64 weeks, with contractors leaving the works in a disgraceful condition. I welcome the Government's boost to the building of more social housing and the extra £350,000 of homelessness funding announced for Sheffield this week. How does the Minister plan to empower local authorities to ensure that contractors deliver social house building and repairs to a high standard and on time?

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** All social housing tenants deserve to live in decent homes, to be treated with fairness and respect and to have their problems quickly resolved. Under the Regulator of Social Housing's safety and quality standard, housing associations and councils must provide an effective, efficient and timely repair service for their homes, including setting timetables for completion and clearly communicating with residents. As my hon. Friend knows, we will also introduce Awaab's law and a new decent homes standard to set the minimum quality that social homes must meet.

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

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Recently, a 1-acre site in Corfe Mullen in my constituency was sold. It was a house surrounded by lots of beautiful gardens, and I think the House can see where this is going. The neighbours raised the alarm that the trees were going to be taken down. They flagged it with the council, which did not see a problem, and a week later, in the dead of night, the developers brought chainsaws and destroyed every bit of nature on the site. Will the Minister commit to bringing forward legislation to auto-protect trees above a particular size or age in their planning reforms, so that developers do not get away with environmental vandalism?

**Matthew Pennycook:** Protections are already in place, but if the hon. Lady wishes to write to me with further details of that particular case, on which I do not have the full information to allow me to comment now, I will endeavour to look into the matter more carefully and to provide her with a full response.

T3. [902269] **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): More than 600 households across Luton are living in temporary accommodation, with families scattered across hotels and bed and breakfasts waiting for homes to become available. The previous Government's inaction on housing has made that painful wait even longer. It takes nearly a decade for a four-bedroom property to become available in Luton. Can the Secretary of State outline what steps she is taking to shorten waiting times and increase social housing stock for people in Luton North?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** The Secretary of State is leading the charge in building 1.5 million homes to tackle the supply challenge that we face as a country, because of the housing crisis we inherited. We also announced £500 million for the affordable homes programme in the Budget and funding for homelessness services has gone up by £233 million, bringing the total to a billion pounds. I am pleased to say that Luton will receive more than £6.3 million. Furthermore, we are investing £210,000 in the emergency accommodation reduction pilot.

T4. [902270] **Peter Fortune** (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): Following the Grenfell tragedy, the residents of Northpoint in my constituency have had to pay charges of nearly £700,000 for a waking watch, fire wardens and alarms. Given the Government's manifesto commitment to better protect leaseholders from costs, what steps can the Minister take to help my constituents with the reimbursement of those charges?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** Sadly, I hear these stories across the country as well. The reality is that the best step that can be taken is for the developer to enter into the cladding safety scheme, to get the building remediated and to get the costs removed. In the meantime, we have made money available through the waking watch replacement fund, so that that particularly expensive way of keeping a building safe can be replaced. There are ways of tackling the pain in the short term, but the reality is that the only solution is the remediation of buildings, and that is why we are pushing on so hard through our remediation acceleration plan.

T5. [902271] **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): Transparency International recently reported that since 2010, £38.6 million of donations into UK politics have come from unincorporated associations, which are not required to report their source of income. With that in mind, will the Minister close political donation loopholes to protect our democracy from foreign influence by banning unincorporated associations and shell companies that have never turned a profit from donating to political parties?

**Rushanara Ali:** Effective regulation of political finance is crucial for maintaining trust in our electoral system and our democracy. The UK already has a strong framework that makes clear that only those with a legitimate interest in UK elections can make political donations, but the Government committed in our manifesto to strengthening the rules on donations to political parties in order to protect our democracy from foreign interference. We will bring forward proposals in due course.

T7. [902273] **Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): I recently spoke to Chris Dodson, a local thatcher in Sawtry, who raised with me the shortage of thatching straw, and particularly long straw thatch. With Historic England insisting that grade II listed properties should use like-for-like materials in replacements and the chance of listed building consent to change from straw to water reed unlikely to be granted, will the Minister confirm what the Government are doing to ensure that thatchers are not hindered by the current guidance and the shortage of thatching straw?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I confess that that is a question to which I do not have the answer. The Government intend to amend building regulations later this year as part of the introduction of future standards, and it sounds like this issue, which I think came up in the debate on a private Member's Bill on Friday, is one that we need to consider. I am more than happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman and have a further discussion about it.

T6. [902272] **Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): Last week I met a young dad at Derby City Mission who had been sleeping rough until he used its Safe Space night shelter. He was then able to move into one of its bedrooms, and he had just been informed that there was a home for him to move into: another step towards having somewhere his son can visit him next Christmas. Will the Minister consider whether that stepped model could be used to help more rough sleepers become ready for permanent accommodation?

**Rushanara Ali:** I thank my hon. Friend for sharing that excellent example of the vital work of Derby City Mission. I am pleased that it received £272,000 of Government funding through the night shelter transformation fund, to help people off the streets and into their own accommodation. The Government's investment of nearly a billion pounds will allow partners to develop vital services for those in need, and we will draw on those lessons.

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): The hugely increased housing target for East Hampshire gets further skewed by the extent of its overlap with a national park. Will the Housing Minister meet me to discuss our unusual situation and the case for having two separately set housing targets?

**Matthew Pennycook:** There are issues in such cases, particularly around the data that is available, and we are in conversation with the Office for National Statistics about that. I am more than happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss it further.

T8. [902274] **Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Residents in Oakwood, which is part of the city of Derby, are concerned about the impact that potential development on the last field adjoining Chaddesden wood would have on the rich biodiversity of this designated local nature reserve. What steps are Ministers taking to ensure that we meet our much-needed housing targets while protecting nature and historic woodlands?

**Matthew Pennycook:** Ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees are already strictly protected in national planning policy, while tree preservation orders safeguard individual trees or groups of trees of particular value. It is for local planning authorities to apply the protections effectively as they have principal responsibility. I am more than happy to discuss that further with my hon. Friend.

**Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): My constituents, particularly in Great Glen, have just experienced devastating flooding. Under the last Government, we opened up the flood recovery framework so that they could get grants to protect themselves. When will they be able to access that money under this Government?

**Alex Norris:** The hon. Gentleman will know that these decisions are taken on a case-by-case basis, generally depending on the extent of damage from floods. We will look at that closely. I would be willing to talk to him to ensure that the accountability is there.

T9. [902275] **Paula Barker** (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): Tomorrow, it will be 1,000 days since the repeal of the Vagrancy Act 1824 was given Royal Assent, yet that outdated, vindictive and utterly ineffective Act is still driving people away from the support they need and into an already overloaded courts system. There is no need for a replacement as existing antisocial behaviour laws are sufficient. May I urge the Minister to please drop the peculiar and cautious civil service group-think? We are 201 years on. Will she advise when the commencement of the repeal will happen?

**Rushanara Ali:** The Vagrancy Act is antiquated and no longer fit for purpose. No one should be criminalised for sleeping rough on the streets. We want to ensure that we avoid criminalising the most vulnerable, while also ensuring that the police and local authorities have the tools they need to make communities feel safe. We are currently considering our next steps.

**Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): Will the Government look at redefining affordable housing in national policy so that it is pegged to average local income rather than at the whim of an overheated housing market?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We did make changes to some of the definitions around affordable housing in the recently revised national planning policy framework, by separating out the definition of social rent, but I hear the hon. Gentleman's concerns. I will certainly bear them in mind as we develop policy.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): For fire safety remediation works for buildings over 11 metres, there is a cap on non-cladding costs and leaseholders are given 10 years to pay remediation costs. However, my constituent in a building under 11 metres has been informed that he may have to pay costs within 12 months because the freeholder is a housing association and because of restrictions around credit and debt. Will the Minister meet me to resolve the issue and allow some flexibility?

**Alex Norris:** I would be very happy to take that meeting. We approach buildings under 11 metres on a case-by-case basis to seek a solution. I am happy to do so with my hon. Friend.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Bathford village shop and café has become a lifeline for local people in my Bath community, but it is at risk of losing its premises. The £150 million community ownership fund was crucial to sustaining these local assets. Will the Minister comment on the future of the community ownership fund?

**Alex Norris:** The community ownership fund came to an end with its round in December; the previous Government, of course, left no future funding for it. The hon. Lady knows that we have made a significant commitment around the community right to buy and a significant commitment around local growth funding. Future ownership funds will be a matter for the multi-year spending review in the spring.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It was freezing over the weekend in York. Despite working with North Yorkshire emergency accommodation services, I was unable to find accommodation for a very vulnerable constituent of mine. Will the Minister ensure that in the homelessness review we hold local authorities to account and that no resident's case is put in the "too difficult to manage" box?

**Rushanara Ali:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that deeply troubling set of circumstances. We will not only ensure an immediate response through the funding that we are providing, but ensure that we bring to our cross-Government strategy the perspectives and experiences of those who are affected.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The Planning Inspectorate has overturned the democratic decision of Walsall council and decided to allow a battery energy storage system to go ahead at Chapel Lane in my constituency, a green-belt site in a historical open space. As this creates a dangerous precedent, will the Secretary of State clarify whether we will see more of this under her new policies on the grey belt?

**Matthew Pennycook:** The right hon. Lady will appreciate that we cannot comment on live or concluded decisions, as to do so would prejudice them. Our policy on grey belt and on how grey belt is released is set out in full in our response to the NPPF consultation.

**Anneliese Midgley** (Knowsley) (Lab): Recently, I visited the Royal Mail delivery office in Huyton. Posties spoke to me about serious problems with low-level letterboxes, including bad back and joint issues and an increase in

bad dog attacks. One postie even showed me scars across his hand from a dog attack. Will the Minister meet me, the Communication Workers Union and posties to discuss the matter in regard to new builds?

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

**Matthew Pennycook:** Not least with a view to making myself the most popular Member of the House, I will happily do so.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): On Friday, I met the leader of Wiltshire council, who asserts that the way the Government have calculated the distribution of compensation between in-house and commissioned services means that Wiltshire has not fared well in the local government settlement that was announced on 18 December. Will the Minister meet me so that I can better understand the thinking and relay it back to the leader of my council?

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** We know that local government is feeling the pressures after 14 years that did not bode well for local and public services. We understand the pressures associated with national insurance, which is why the Treasury has committed £515 million to support councils in that endeavour. I am more than happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman about his particular circumstance.

**Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Are the Government considering compensation schemes for homeowners who have suffered financial losses due to reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in their properties? If so, I am especially interested in the Barnett impact for the Scottish Government of any such scheme, as I have constituents from Tillicoultry whose lives have been seriously impacted.

**Alex Norris:** As my hon. Friend alluded to, RAAC is a devolved matter. The responsibility for ensuring that buildings are safe is, of course, that of the owner, but we keep RAAC under active consideration in case any support is needed.

**Martin Wrigley** (Newton Abbot) (LD): I draw the House's attention to my entry on the Register of Members' Financial Interests. At Teignbridge district council, I oversaw the commencement of council house building for the first time in 30 years. Will the Secretary of State meet me and others to discuss what can be done to make it easier for other councils to build more council homes?

**Angela Rayner:** I commend the hon. Gentleman for that work. We want councils to be able to contribute to council housing. I will happily get the Housing Minister to meet the hon. Gentleman.

**Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I welcome the Government's tripling of the emergency housing budget, but one of my constituents is about to be made homeless because debt incurred as a teenager means that she is not eligible for social housing. Are the Government willing to look at that? I am sure that they do not think that debt should be a reason for homelessness.

**Rushanara Ali:** I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the case. He will be aware that we are acting as quickly as possible to support local authorities to provide the necessary support to those affected, such as his constituent.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): Many residents of West Suffolk who live in new build homes put up with management companies that fail to do the basic things expected of them, from sorting out roads and planting trees to maintaining shared spaces. They often pass the buck to the developers, who pass it back again. What plans have the Government to get to grips with these cowboy companies?

**Matthew Pennycook:** As I made clear in a previous answer, we remain committed to protecting residential freeholders on these estates from unfair charges. This year, we will consult on implementing the consumer protection provisions in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024, which will cover up to 1.75 million homes subject to those charges. We intend to bring the measures into force as quickly as possible. I am more than happy to discuss the matter further with the hon. Gentleman.

**Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, there are 160,000 children in temporary accommodation, and in many cases the definition of “temporary” is being stretched to breaking point. Does she agree that the Government’s homelessness strategy needs to look specifically at the outcomes for children who have experienced long-term or repeated spells in temporary accommodation?

**Angela Rayner:** I absolutely agree. That is why we have an inter-ministerial group—we are determined to tackle homelessness. This is not just about children in temporary accommodation; it affects every single aspect of their lives and outcomes. With our opportunities mission, we are determined to give every child the best possible outcome.

**Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The New Homes (Solar Generation) Bill—the sunshine Bill—received a sunny disposition from all sides of the House

among the private Members’ Bills we debated on Friday. In the upcoming uprating of building regulations, will the Housing Minister confirm that solar generation will be part of the requirements for all new houses?

**Matthew Pennycook:** The Government’s position was set out in some detail on Friday when I responded to the debate on the private Member’s Bill. As the hon. Gentleman will know, I am in conversation with the promoter of that Bill, the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), to shape the design of the future standards that we are bringing forward.

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): In Scotland, we have record levels of children living in temporary accommodation without a home to call their own. Some 10,000 children have been left homeless on the SNP Government’s watch. The SNP is taking Scotland in the wrong direction. Does the Secretary of State agree that Scotland needs a new direction and a Scottish Labour Government in 2026?

**Angela Rayner:** Yes.

**Patrick Spencer** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Suffolk has a huge flooding problem. Part of the problem has been driven by overdevelopment in low-lying rural areas. In her steps to reform the planning system—as well as building more houses, which I totally accept we need to do—can the Secretary of State promise to force councils and developers to properly account for flood risk, ensure that developers are held accountable to residents when developments are badly impacted by floods, and ensure that housing targets favour homes built in dense urban areas?

**Matthew Pennycook:** As I have made clear, we are prioritising development on previously developed brownfield land wherever possible, and we encourage local authorities to look to that option in the first instance. We have made changes to the NPPF to clarify flood risk and issues that relate to it. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I will be more than happy to look at the specifics in his area in more detail.

## UK-Ukraine 100-year Partnership

3.40 pm

**The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy):** With permission, Mr Speaker, before I turn to Ukraine, I want to begin by welcoming the release of Emily Damari. After 471 days of captivity, she has been brought home. It was deeply moving to see the pictures of Emily and her mother Mandy reunited. I pay tribute once again to all those who campaigned so tirelessly for this moment. The Government will continue to work closely with our partners to secure the release of all the hostages, get aid into Gaza and see the deal implemented in full.

With permission, Mr Speaker, I will now make a statement on Ukraine. Last week, my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister visited Kyiv. It was his seventh meeting with President Zelensky, but this visit had a special purpose: to sign a historic 100-year partnership with Ukraine. The partnership enshrines both sides' commitment to a relationship benefiting the whole of our nations: businesses as well as the Government, communities as well as our military. It consists of a legally binding treaty and a political agreement outlining our co-operation in greater detail. We will lay the treaty before this House for scrutiny in the usual way.

The partnership covers the full breadth of our friendship, across nine pillars. In each area, deeper co-operation can enhance our collective security and help us both to build resilient, flourishing economies. On maritime security, through joint exercises and training between the Royal Navy and the Ukrainian navy, we can enhance their effectiveness and learn from their successes in securing the Black sea. On air defence, the supply of 15 Gravehawk missile systems, produced in Yorkshire by BAE Systems, is a direct benefit to our economy and an innovative new capability for Ukraine. On the energy sector, the agreement cements the United Kingdom as Ukraine's preferred partner, opening up opportunities for us and them in areas such as renewables and green steel.

The Prime Minister saw at first hand what our work together can mean for the people of Ukraine, while visiting a burns unit supported by specialist national health service doctors, helping them to treat victims of indiscriminate Russian attacks and joining a Ukrainian class speaking to a primary school in Liverpool. It is these young people who will reap the rewards of the efforts we are making today.

A partnership lasting 100 years, beyond the lifetime of even the youngest Members of this House, is unprecedented, but it reflects the unique nature of our friendship—a friendship that Members on all sides did so much to strengthen. I pay particular tribute to the work of my predecessors the right hon. Member for Braintree (Mr Cleverly), the noble Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton and the former Member for Welwyn Hatfield for their work under the previous Government in supporting this partnership.

This cross-party unity is a source of strength for our country and a source of strength for Ukraine. It is a unity that goes well beyond this House. Members will have witnessed it in their constituencies, from the more than 200,000 Ukrainians who have found refuge in our homes to the countless Ukrainian flags flying proudly outside churches and town halls across the country.

This Government have shown strong support for Ukraine since our first day in office. For my part, I have called out Putin's modern-day imperialism in the United Nations Security Council, I have been using the full force of our sanctions against Putin's war machine, with the UK having led the way in sanctioning Putin's shadow fleet, and I announced over £600 million in humanitarian and fiscal support during my own visit to Kyiv in September. My ministerial colleagues have been playing their full part as well. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has accelerated the delivery of military aid, extended our training of Ukrainian soldiers to at least the end of the year and signed a defence industrial treaty with Ukraine, allowing it to draw on £3.5 billion of UK export finance to acquire military equipment. This month, legislation introduced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor came into force, enabling a loan of over £2 billion more to Ukraine, all of it repaid through the use of profits from frozen Russian assets. That funding comes on top of the Government's commitment, made by the Prime Minister in our first week in office, to provide £3 billion a year in military aid in every year that it is needed. We do not know for how long it will be needed; it is for Ukraine to decide at what point and in what way to have any form of talks with Russia, and Ukraine will continue to need support from its friends even after Putin's barbaric, illegal war comes to an end. We have always said that we want to see a just and lasting peace, but our priority right now, together with our allies, is to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position to achieve that.

Three things are clear. First, Ukrainians want to live at peace with their neighbour. They did not provoke this war, whatever the false claims of the Kremlin or its army of bots online, but now that Putin's mafia state is preying on them, they are fighting back courageously. Their cause is just: quite simply, the freedom to choose their own future. Secondly, Putin shows no sign of wanting peace. He could end this war tomorrow by withdrawing from Ukraine, yet he insists that the war will not end until he has achieved his objectives—objectives that amount to the subjugation of the Ukrainian people. That is no basis for meaningful dialogue, and Putin's actions speak far louder than his twisted words: inhuman strikes on civilians on Christmas Day, dispatching North Korean troops to the frontline, and wave after wave of attacks on the brave people of Ukraine.

Finally, Putin's position is not one of strength. The invasion has been a monumental strategic failure, and pressure is mounting. Russia's casualty rate is staggering, the highest number of military casualties that the country has suffered since the second world war, and Russia is more insecure than it was before the war—and for what? Russia gained some territory last year, yes: fields and small settlements, left barren by relentless bombardment, and taken at a rate so slow that the Russians would need a century to conquer all of Ukraine. Meanwhile, their economy struggles increasingly to sustain the war through this year alone. Spiralling inflation is making basic goods such as butter unaffordable, welfare cuts are hitting the most vulnerable, and interest rates have been hiked to a record 21%. We are approaching the third anniversary of this conflict, and, as the Prime Minister said in Kyiv, we must not let up now. Putin hopes that the world lacks his resolve, and we need to call his bluff to prove him wrong.

[Mr David Lammy]

This is not simply a moral necessity, although I know that the whole House has moral clarity on the righteousness of supporting Ukraine. It is also a strategic necessity for Britain and our allies. If Putin wins in Ukraine, the post-war order founded in great part by my predecessor Ernie Bevin, which has kept us all safe for more than eight decades, will be seriously undermined. Foundational principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity will be shaken, and a more dangerous world will result. That is why the Government will not falter, it is why the Prime Minister travelled to Kyiv, and it is why we stand firmly with Ukraine, today, tomorrow, and for generations to come. I commend this statement to the House.

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

3.48 pm

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): May I start by joining the Foreign Secretary in welcoming the release of Emily Damari yesterday? Our thoughts are with her, with her family and with all the hostages at this time. I associate those on this side of the House with the Foreign Secretary's comments.

I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for providing advance sight of his statement. For nearly three years the House has stood united and steadfast in our support of the people of Ukraine. We admire their determination, courage and bravery in the face of such horror, terror and brutality being inflicted on them, and our hearts bleed for the pain, the loss and the suffering that Putin has caused through his illegal war and invasion of a sovereign country.

From day one—in fact, since before Russian troops started the latest wave of aggression in 2022—the British Government have backed President Zelensky in defence of Ukraine's freedom. We recognise the threats posed since the invasion of Crimea in 2014, and the ongoing incursions in the east. We quickly provided the Ukrainians with military equipment, aid and finance. We set up bespoke routes to provide safety in the UK for those needing to leave Ukraine, and the British people opened their homes. Through Boris Johnson and Ben Wallace, we led global diplomatic efforts to rally the world in support of Ukraine and to isolate Russia. That included one of the most comprehensive packages of sanctions ever imposed on a country, members of its ruling regime, and businesses with links to Putin and the war.

When we were in government, our commitment to Ukraine was solid, and we were grateful for the support of the then Opposition. In three years, we have provided £12.8 billion-worth of support for Ukraine, including £7.8 billion in military assistance, and we welcome the ongoing commitment to provide at least £3 billion a year in military aid for as long as it is needed.

As the Foreign Secretary will know, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) and my noble Friend Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton were instrumental in laying the foundations for this partnership. The partnership reached commitments to a long-standing and deep relationship between our two countries. At this time of uncertainty for Ukraine, the prospect of future stability and our ongoing friendship and support will be welcome.

Can the Foreign Secretary provide more details about the following elements of the partnership? First, on security and defence, referenced in articles 2 and 3, can he give an update on when he expects the proposed maritime partnership to be concluded, and on how any such partnership can be impacted in the future? The partnership also enshrines our support for Ukraine becoming a future NATO ally, so can the Foreign Secretary give an update on his discussions with the incoming US Administration on their plans, and on how we can ensure that there is consistency in this partnership? On defence alliances, can he give an update on the progress being made towards spending 2.5% of gross domestic product on defence?

Secondly, the partnership commits to increasing economic and trade co-operation, partnership working on energy, and work on science, technology and innovation. Will the Foreign Secretary elaborate on the levels of investment that he expects to be made, and on what work is under way within Government and with the private sector to facilitate that? What discussions are under way with our international partners to boost the contributions that they are making?

Thirdly, can the Foreign Secretary give an update on the further steps being taken to isolate and undermine Putin and Russia, including responses to the use of North Korean troops fighting for Russia? Does he expect to announce further sanctions and activities to mobilise assets, to fund the rebuilding of Ukraine?

Fourthly, the partnership refers to commitments to “combatting foreign information manipulation and interference” in article 7. Will the Foreign Secretary give an update on how that will work in practical terms, and on the steps being taken to prevent and combat Russian interference in other countries, including Moldova, Romania and Georgia?

There will continue to be difficult days ahead for the people of Ukraine, but their fight for freedom is a just cause, because they are not only fighting to free their country from Putin's aggression; they are fighting for our values and freedoms, too. That is why we must continue to stand by them, and to make sure that this partnership is a success and gives Ukraine hope for a brighter future. Slava Ukraini!

**Mr Lammy:** I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her words, which underline the bipartisan support in this House. It was very useful for me to be in Washington DC with the Defence Secretary last May, when we underlined to colleagues across Capitol Hill that here in the United Kingdom this remains a bipartisan issue. It is a great indication of what we can achieve in this Parliament on matters of the greatest concern.

On the right hon. Lady's last point, she will understand that today is inauguration day and it would have been a bit pre-emptive to have had discussions with the incoming Administration on the security guarantees and on Ukraine's path to NATO. She knows that we set out an irreversible pathway to membership at the NATO conference when we came into office, and that remains the position. She also asked me about the security pillar, and that is important. Helping Ukraine to reach NATO's standards, particularly across its military structures, to support Ukraine's irreversible path to NATO membership, is something that we in this country take very seriously.

Ukraine has defended itself resolutely in cyber-space in the face of Russian aggression, and the UK has been proud to support that defence, both in Ukraine and also in the next-door country. The right hon. Lady mentioned cyber. I was in Moldova seeing the work that we fund, which began before we came into power. It is good, hugely important work, and when we see the interference across the region in Romania and Georgia, the importance of this work is underlined even further.

The right hon. Lady rightly talked about the maritime context and strengthening our maritime capabilities. Working with Ukraine to protect Black sea security is essential to its future security and prosperity. Some 49% of Ukraine's pre-war trade went through the Black sea, and I might say that that is why, for a substantial period of history, Russia has wanted total control of much of the Black sea. Through the agreement, we will work together to ensure the safety of trade in the Black and Azov seas through joint naval tasking and de-mining activity, which will be hugely important once this war comes to an end.

More broadly, it is important for me to be absolutely clear on the issue of third-party support. I raised concerns with my Chinese counterpart when I was in China on 18 October about the supply of equipment to Russia and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's relationship with Russia. The right hon. Lady knows that I went on to designate companies that we saw dealing with that dual-use technology. The direct participation of DPRK troops in combat operations is another dangerous expansion of Putin's illegal war against Ukraine and further proof that he has no interest in peace. We have also imposed sanctions on a number of Iranian individuals, on 10 September and again on 18 November, including Iran Air, in response to Iran's transfer of ballistic missiles to Russia.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I want once again to thank the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister for willing this partnership into life. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Ukraine, I fully support all nine pillars of the agreement, as I am sure all members of the all-party group do. Pillar 4 deals with the economy and trade, and there are many things we can do now to deepen and strengthen our trade relations with Ukraine, one of which involves joint ventures. What work will be done to remove insurance barriers and trade barriers, for instance, to give access to kindred or joint venture partnerships between UK and Ukrainian companies in all areas, including defence?

**Mr Lammy:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all his work on the all-party group. He will be pleased that there are active conversations on this very issue at this time. He will know, too, that because of some of the changes that my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary has made on procurement, we are doing all we can to assist trade in Ukraine, as complicated as that is at this moment.

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

**Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I associate myself with the Foreign Secretary's remarks on the release of Emily Damari, and I thank him for advance sight of his statement.

I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment last week to a 100-year partnership with Ukraine, and today I am thinking of those in Ukraine who have faced 35 months of continuous conflict since Russia's illegal invasion in 2022. I am also thinking of the many communities across the UK that have welcomed thousands of Ukrainian families since that time. The courage and resilience of our Ukrainian guests has been matched by the solidarity and generosity of British communities. Cross-party support for our ally Ukraine has been unwavering.

I assure our Ukrainian allies that we will continue to support them, for in the face of expansionist Russian aggression and threats to democracy, Ukraine's fight is indeed our fight. Yet today is a critical juncture, for a man who described Putin's invasion of Ukraine as "genius" will today become President of the United States, while his vice-president has advocated for a deal that would reward Russia with the territory that Putin has seized, so I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement that the Ukrainians must have the freedom to choose their own future.

In that context, what initial contact has the Foreign Secretary had with the incoming US Administration about Ukraine? What assurance can he give the House that the US will stay the course and not press Ukraine to capitulate to Russia? If the Foreign Secretary is unable to give that assurance, will he agree that we must redouble our efforts to work with our European allies to secure Ukraine's future and our own security?

I welcome the Prime Minister's tour of Ukraine and eastern Europe last week, but it leaves some questions that I now put to the Foreign Secretary. What new actions and investments will the UK take to support security in Europe? How will the UK demonstrate the strengthened leadership in the joint expeditionary force that our European partners expect? And did the Prime Minister raise with our allies the support expressed by Members across this House for mobilising the frozen Russian assets held in the UK and Europe to support our Ukrainian allies?

We must stand with Ukraine for the long haul. The Ukrainian people must be in charge of their own destiny. If the UK's new pledge is to be real, it must address the uncertainty generated by President Trump. The Prime Minister's 100-year commitment must outlast the President's desire for a quick deal in his first 100 days.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I remind the Front Benches of the set times that they are meant to stick to. Can they please look at this and make sure they get it right next time?

**Mr Lammy:** I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) for his questions and their bipartisan spirit. We welcome the bipartisan support that we eventually got from the United States after a lot of lobbying, including from my predecessor. It should not be forgotten that it was a £61 billion package to support Ukraine, notwithstanding the work that Europe is currently doing.

It is also important to say that Europe now shoulders two thirds of all aid to Ukraine, including over half of all military aid. In President Trump, we find someone who has been consistent in urging those colleagues across Europe who are still not spending 2% of GDP on defence. Since Roosevelt, successive US Presidents have raised this. When President Trump first came to office,

[Mr Lammy]

just six countries were meeting their commitment. By the time he left, it was 18. That must be something we can welcome.

I encourage the hon. Gentleman to look at my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary's announcements in December in relation to procurement and the assistance we will continue to give to Ukraine, and on the ease with which Ukraine can now use our processes to get the equipment it needs to modernise its systems. The UK will provide £2.26 billion of additional support to Ukraine as part of the G7 extraordinary revenue acceleration loan scheme, which will be repaid using the profits of frozen Russian sovereign assets, and that must be welcome.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the JEF, which is hugely important. The support from the Baltic nations is extraordinary. The JEF is a very important partnership, and it has been one of the most proactive groupings in support of Ukraine. All JEF nations have signed their own bilateral security agreements with Ukraine. JEF nations are some of Ukraine's strongest supporters and will continue to be so.

I also commend to the hon. Gentleman the Interflex training that we are doing with Ukraine, which we have said will continue until the end of this year.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): I am proud of my constituents in Hampstead and Highgate who opened their doors to Ukrainian refugees, and those at South Hampstead synagogue who offered free history and English lessons. Last year, I met some of those refugees to talk about the enormous cultural contribution they are making to our country. Turning to the pillar 9 of the partnership, what is the Foreign Secretary doing to ensure those who have been forced to flee their homes retain cultural links with their country and preserve their sense of heritage?

**Mr Lammy:** I am grateful to take my hon. Friend's question and to see her back in her place. She is right to commend the work of her constituents in offering their homes to Ukrainian families, as many of our constituents are doing. Three years into this war, it is important that we commend their efforts. Under pillar 9, which is about the strong people-to-people links that exist across the country, we are working with the Premier League and the British Council to help young people in Ukraine to develop the skills, education and confidence needed for them to be assets in society, and to promote the power of the English language. Over time, I hope we will see the power of the Ukrainian language in our country and our schools.

**Mr James Cleverly** (Braintree) (Con): I find myself thanking the right hon. Gentleman for the second time in quick succession for his gracious recognition of the work done by his Conservative predecessors, including me. I am reminded of conversations I have had with President Zelensky and, particularly, Prime Minister Shmyhal about our collective desire that when the scars and pain of the conflict have diminished, the bond of friendship between the UK and Ukraine is maintained. To that end, what can the Government do now to make it easier to de-risk some British-based businesses and potential investors going to Ukraine to start the rebuilding work now, in preparation for that glorious day when

Russia is ejected from Ukraine sovereign territory and the Ukrainians can properly start to rebuild their homeland once again?

**Mr Lammy:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. As he knows, friendships can exist across the House, and I have greatly valued his over the years. I put on record my thanks for the work he did; I know this partnership was first mentioned in a meeting he had with the former Member for Welwyn Hatfield and I am pleased to be able to take that work forward. The idea he mentions is a good one. He will be pleased that one of the things that flowed from the Prime Minister's trip to Ukraine is the possibility of such a delegation to Ukraine, perhaps led by a Business Minister, at some point in the future, when it feels safe to make such a visit. That will mean we can assess the opportunities, which go well beyond Kyiv. A huge industrial base existed in Ukraine before the war. There are huge opportunities because it is "the bread basket of Europe" and because of the innovation present in the country, which a lot of people do not realise, that has led to one of the biggest drone industries on the planet.

**Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement and his announcement that the UK will continue to do all it can to keep Ukraine in the fight in the face of Putin's unlawful war of aggression. He mentioned sanctions. Will he update the House about what discussions he has had with international counterparts on seizing and repurposing Russian state sanctions, to the tune of the £300 billion held in G7 countries, to finance Ukraine to keep it in the fight?

**Mr Lammy:** That was a very good question. I reassure my hon. Friend that the subject remains under active discussion with our colleagues, particularly in Europe. We have made progress in relation to interest. We recognise that more funds need to be found to keep Ukraine in the fight. There are differences of opinion about the lawfulness and legality of doing this, and the implication for the markets particularly at this time. Those discussions are live and active, and I was with the Weimar group of not just Foreign Ministers, because Prime Minister Meloni and Chancellor Scholz were there as well, discussing these very issues just before the Christmas break.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is welcome to hear that this partnership agreement is a binding treaty. As such, it contrasts with the Budapest memorandum, which was non-binding and not worth the paper it was written on. There is a lot of talk about how Ukraine is on an irreversible path to NATO membership, but it will be difficult to get a consensus for that anytime soon among the 32 NATO members. In lieu of NATO membership, what security guarantees might the UK seek to develop for Ukraine with European allies?

**Mr Lammy:** This is a very live issue. As I said in my statement, we do not see Putin ready to halt his aggression and come to the table for serious negotiations, but just as this country has stood by Ukraine throughout, and provided very important intelligence in the run-up to this war, we will recognise our part in working with others on security guarantees.

**Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement on this 100-year partnership with such an important European ally. We absolutely understand how our futures are linked. I want to recognise the Ukrainian community in Milton Keynes, which has established the Sunflower school and held the first Holodomor memorial event. These communities are very worried. They are coming to the renewal of their visas because they never thought that they would be here this long. They have built new businesses, family connections, and friends and community connections. Can we reassure Ukrainians in the UK that they will continue to have our support for the duration of the war, and potentially support afterwards for some of them to continue their lives here?

**Mr Lammy:** I reassure Ukrainians in the strongest terms—I hope that they might see the 100-year partnership as a signal of this—that the UK will stand with them long after none of us are in this Chamber. That is the nature of the partnership. They should be reassured, and remember that war strikes indelible bonds; just as it did between us and the United States after the second world war, it will do so between us and Ukraine.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I am sure that the Foreign Secretary's statement will be as welcome in Kyiv as it is in this House. He referred to the 200,000 refugees in this country. Further to the point that the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) made, many of those people would like to return home, but home is a war zone, particularly in the east, and they cannot do so. They therefore have children in school here, and have built lives here. It would reassure them to know that they are safe and secure in the United Kingdom for not just the future but the immediate future, and will be able to be here for as long as it takes.

**Mr Lammy:** None of us knows when the war will complete, but across our constituencies we all recognise communities that continue to be here, coming out of other conflicts. I am thinking of Kosovan communities, for example, which exist right across the country; I can think of a significant community in south London in particular. Many Ukrainians want to return, and we should make it possible for them to do so, but in some areas there will have to be a lot of de-mining, let us face it, in order for them to go back to their homes. Let us see where we get to at the end of the conflict.

**Steve Race** (Exeter) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for the statement. Exeter's large and vibrant Ukrainian heritage community will welcome this further strengthening of our cultural, security and economic ties. Going back to sanctions, will he confirm that the UK will continue to keep up the pace and pressure of sanctions on Russia and, indeed, strengthen them where necessary to close the loopholes, in full partnership with our allies?

**Mr Lammy:** I have been very proud of the work I have led on sanctions since coming to office. It is now the strongest sanctions package against Russia anywhere in the world, with more to come.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I welcome the Government's efforts on the 100-year partnership. President Zelensky has made great strides

in cracking down on corruption in his country, but he has a long way to go—he has probably got rid of most of the low-hanging fruit. What extra efforts will the UK Government make in assisting the Ukrainian Government to crack down on corruption, which will aid its ability to get NATO membership? I also push the Foreign Secretary on whether he has further views on how maritime support can work in conjunction with the Montreux convention.

**Mr Lammy:** The right hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that the Minister for Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), met officials from Ukraine on the issue of anti-corruption just a few weeks ago. This is an issue I have spoken about directly with President Zelensky in the past, and it is an issue that the US traditionally has taken a big interest in. I was first in Ukraine looking at those issues in opposition. At that stage, the UK was funding a lot of work with non-governmental organisations. That work must continue to break the corruption—a lot of it a legacy, frankly, of the Soviet Union.

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. We have already seen the extensive role of the Russian shadow fleet in the Black sea and across the world, most recently in the Baltics. What further action can the UK Government take to tackle the role of the Russian Black sea fleet in the conflict?

**Mr Lammy:** One of the issues is how third countries, some of them significant countries, are still facilitating the Russian shadow fleet because of the illicit oil that finds its way into various economies. Those are conversations that we and our European partners continue to take forward. If we are serious about tackling Putin's aggression, we have to be serious about the revenues that finance it.

**Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): This morning, I was struck to hear the Foreign Secretary describe Donald Trump as a man of

"incredible grace, generosity...very funny, very friendly, very warm" and say that most of the world is glad he is back in power. Yet, as Trump re-enters the White House, there are significant concerns about whether support for Ukraine from the US—so far Ukraine's biggest backer—will continue. With Trump boasting that he will stop the war in Ukraine in a day, and with his choice for US Secretary of State saying on Wednesday that Ukraine will have to make "concessions" to Russia, does the Foreign Secretary think that Ukraine is as happy as he is to see Trump back in power?

**Mr Lammy:** I encourage the hon. Gentleman to actually read the words of President Zelensky, who said that he welcomed Donald Trump and his approach of "peace through strength". I encourage him to take all opportunities he gets over the coming years to meet Donald Trump and make up his own mind.

**Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of the new grain verification scheme, which will help track stolen grain from occupied Ukrainian territories. Does my right

[Johanna Baxter]

hon. Friend agree that this is an important UK contribution given Ukraine's role as a major agricultural producer, which gives it a critical position in global food security?

**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend is exactly right. People forget that before this war, Ukraine was effectively the breadbasket of Europe. This is an issue that I spoke about with Ms McCain of the World Food Programme. It is hugely important that those grain supplies are able to leave the country. It is hugely important that they are not sabotaged. That is one of the reasons why the pillar on the Black sea is important: there must be the means for the grain supplies to leave Ukraine. The work continues.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I join others in very much welcoming this declaration of solidarity between London and Kyiv on the future of Ukraine, but there is something surreal in these exchanges. Everything is about to change very dramatically; we all know that this is a kind of pre-positioning statement in advance of Mr Trump assuming the presidency. What assessment have the Government made—the Foreign Secretary has given us no idea of this at all—of what President Trump is likely to do and of how they will respond? How ready are they to ensure that we do not falter and that we step up our support for Ukraine along with our European allies—or will President Trump call all the shots?

**Mr Lammy:** I say to the hon. Gentleman—in whose question is a seriousness about the cost of war and what it takes to negotiate—that when I met Donald Trump, my sense was that he did understand acutely the importance of this war, and he struck me as a man who is not prepared to be a loser. It is becoming clearer and clearer that Putin shows no sign whatsoever of wanting to negotiate, and we must therefore continue to support Ukraine as strongly as we can. The hon. Gentleman will also have picked up—I read about it in the papers—that there was a sense previously of a rush towards negotiation. That has moved over time somewhat, and that must be right as a new Administration pick up the files and fully grip this, understanding of course that we all want peace.

**Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I warmly welcome this bold new partnership. I think it is a source of pride for everyone in the House that we have more than 200,000 Ukrainians living among us as our friends and neighbours. Will the Foreign Secretary offer a tribute to the Ukrainian community in Welwyn Garden City, who have set up a thriving Saturday school that I had the pleasure of visiting just before Christmas? I encourage him to look favourably on their ask for us to fast-track Ukrainian as a GCSE and A-level language, because many young people would love to study it but do not currently have the opportunity to do so.

**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that the partnership between schools under pillar 9 is fundamental. It is what gives us the bedrock on which to build both the English language capability in Ukraine and, I hope, the Ukrainian language capability in this country.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is to be hoped that, as has been said, President Trump can indeed bring significant additional pressure to bear on the dictator Putin to end this horrific war. Will the

Foreign Secretary give additional reassurance to the British people that, although we have invested billions and billions of pounds in supporting Ukraine, we are committed to recovering it from the frozen assets of the Russian state in due course?

**Mr Lammy:** I know that the hon. Gentleman understands history. He will know that after the second world war, we were in quite a lot of debt to the United States as a result of lend-lease, which it took us many years to pay off. Today, no trading relationship of ours is bigger than that with the United States: it totals over \$300 billion, with \$1.2 trillion invested in each other's economies, and 1 million British people working in US companies and 1 million Americans working in British companies. This partnership sets up something similar for the next 100 years. It is the result of war, but it has brought our two nations together. He is absolutely right to centre on how we can better use those Russian assets. That is a matter of close discussion across the European family.

**Mr Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to 100 years of friendship with the people of Ukraine. In pillar 4, which talks about economy and trade, there is a commitment to "broaden mutual market access" and raise "awareness and utilisation of the UK-Ukraine Free Trade Agreement". How long will it take for that work come into effect and for both countries to benefit from it?

**Mr Lammy:** I am so glad that my hon. Friend has drawn attention to pillar 4. That allows me to remind the House that the Prime Minister announced £40 million for a new economic recovery programme, which will create opportunities for UK companies by supporting key growth sectors in Ukraine. That is the bedrock of an enhanced trade and investment opportunity, and eventually a trading relationship when Ukraine gets back to the normality that I know it is so keen to achieve.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I very much welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. As he will know, in order to have an enduring peace, there will need to be credible deterrence for Ukraine. We have already seen the development of deterrence in eastern nations such as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania through the enhanced forward presence. Is the Foreign Secretary thinking of opening up discussions about how we could do that in Ukraine in the future, establishing an enhanced forward presence to underpin its security?

**Mr Lammy:** I am very grateful to the right hon. Member for raising this issue. Ukraine's rightful place is in NATO—allies agreed at the July summit in Washington that that was the rightful place of Ukraine over time. However, he is right that guarantees will be necessary. It is a matter of intense discussion. We have been the European country that has led on our military support for Ukraine, so he is absolutely right that we would expect to play a role in that when the day comes, working with other allies. As President Zelensky has said, the US would have to play a role in that, too.

**Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty),

for their leadership on sanctions. We know that Putin's shadow fleet is still a major source of financing for the war, and that cutting it off is vital to bringing him to the negotiating table and, crucially, preventing him from rearming later on. How does the Secretary of State plan to persuade allies and counterparts—including some of our own British overseas territories—to clamp down on sanctions evasion and expand the capture of the shadow fleet to the full extent of that fleet?

**Mr Lammy:** I am so grateful to my hon. Friend for the work he did on these issues prior to coming to Parliament, and for the work that he continues to do. He will be pleased that this is a subject we have raised, particularly with the overseas territories. It is also something I have raised with both the Indians and the Turks, where we have seen some going behind the rules that we have made in order to inadvertently benefit Russia.

**Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP):** The scores of Ukrainians living in my constituency will be very happy to hear today's statement, because they are fearful about their future due to the length of time that the war has gone on. I just hope that the Foreign Secretary stands by these promises more so than the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has done today for the people of Northern Ireland—he has surrendered to the EU, rather than protect Northern Ireland businesses. However, does the Foreign Secretary have any concerns about the effect that either the resolve of EU countries or the attitude of the forthcoming American Administration is likely to have in undermining the message of support to the Ukrainian people and the message of defiance to Putin?

**Mr Lammy:** I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I am a man of my word, and that I am not as worried as some are. The reason is that while there is this debate—which Donald Trump has continued to push—about our commitment to defence spending, it is important to say that if we let Putin win, defence spending across all of our countries will rocket. During the cold war, defence spending rose to about 7%, so I think all countries need to concentrate their minds on standing by Ukraine.

**Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab):** The Ukrainian defence and tech sectors have proven themselves resilient and innovative under the harsh pressure of war. Will the Foreign Secretary say a bit more about how, under the new 100-year partnership, the UK defence and tech sectors can support their Ukrainian counterparts? Likewise, how can we learn from the innovations of our Ukrainian friends and allies?

**Mr Lammy:** The Ukrainians recognise our huge strengths in higher education and, as result, innovation, which my hon. Friend will that referenced in the eventual treaty. Prior to the war, there was immense expertise in tech and IT in Ukraine. The innovations in drone technology are extraordinary and, frankly, are changing the nature of warfare, from which we should benefit. For all those reasons, that is an important pillar, from which we will gain as much as Ukraine will over the coming years.

**Ben Obese-Jeety (Huntingdon) (Con):** Pillar 2.3 states:

"Throughout the duration of the Declaration, neither Participant will be left alone in the face of an attack or aggression."

To what extent does that act as a NATO article 5 commitment in lieu of Ukraine joining NATO? Does it, like article 5, facilitate direct UK military action in support of Ukraine should it be attacked again in the future in violation of the UN charter? Are other NATO allies also negotiating similar pacts, and to what extent do they complement this one?

**Mr Lammy:** Unusually, the hon. Gentleman is jumping ahead of himself somewhat. We continue to support Ukraine with every military effort. That is going on now, and in a sense that is the reference he is making. I have indicated an irreversible pathway to NATO, as we agreed back in September. This is not article 5.

**Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD):** I welcome the statement, and I thank the Foreign Secretary and his colleagues for working on the partnership. As he will know, the House, in its first debate of the year, called on the Government to investigate how we might seize Russian assets. Notwithstanding his statements about the ongoing conversations and the sensitivities, will he update the House on when he will be able to report back to us on that?

**Mr Lammy:** I simply say to the hon. Gentleman that this is the most sensitive of times. We all recognise that this is a critical year for Ukraine, and further funds will need to be found. I am pleased to see that the \$50 billion loan through the G7 will eventually be getting into Ukrainian coffers, but there is more to do, and the conversations are live at this point in time.

**Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP):** It has been reported—indeed, it was mentioned by the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—that Putin has deployed North Korean troops in Ukraine. What is the Government's response to what is now an axis of operations against Ukraine?

**Mr Lammy:** This is incredibly dangerous, as we see the Euro-Atlantic theatre and the Indo-Pacific theatre coalesce. It is important to emphasise that our assessment is that those troops are being used in Kursk. We see that, we recognise it and we will use all means necessary to deal with that issue with the tools we have as best we can in the coming days.

**Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind):** While the worst of humanity was being demonstrated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, our nation was showing the best of humanity, in our rich tradition, by opening our doors to those displaced by war. One of those families is that of my constituent Professor Ivan Waddington, who has adopted a Ukrainian refugee family, whom he sees as his own. He has asked me to ask the Government whether they are planning to continue with the scheme, and will those Ukrainians who have assimilated and are making a positive contribution to our country have the right to remain in this country when the war ends?

**Mr Lammy:** I recognise why hon. Members have raised this issue, but that must rightly be a determination for the Home Secretary at the appropriate time. However, I want to strongly indicate our support for those families in this country, and our recognition, as the war continues and may go on for some time, of the huge contribution they continue to make. I hope that the 100-year partnership

[Mr Lammy]

that we have signed is an indication of the inextricable link that we think now exists between Ukraine and the United Kingdom.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. It will give the almost 300 Ukrainian families living in my constituency the encouragement they need. It is our desire and their desire that the war in Ukraine will come to an end shortly, for which I am a known advocate, along with many other Members. Do we still intend to send the £3 billion annual military assistance until 2031 whether the war is being fought or not? What will “no less than £3 billion” mean, and will we be expected to fund the Ukraine defence wholly if allies such as the United States of America do not make the same deals?

**Mr Lammy:** Our commitment is for that £3 billion for as long as it takes. It is a solemn and important commitment to Ukraine, and it underlines the cross-party support in the House and the strength of support among the British people.

## New Hospital Programme Review

4.36 pm

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the new hospital programme.

Of all the damage that the Conservative party did during their time in office—the broken public finances, the broken economy, the broken NHS—perhaps the most egregious was the broken trust between the British people and their Government, not just through their scandals or by breaking the rules they imposed on the rest of the country, but by making promises that they never intended to keep.

In 2019, the Conservatives told the British people that they would build 40 new hospitals over the coming decade, but there were never 40 new schemes and many of them were extensions or refurbishments. Put simply, they were not all new, some of them were not hospitals, and there were not 40 of them. Five years passed, start dates were delayed, spades remained out of the ground, and it became clear the announcement was a work of fiction.

Yet what did the Conservative party manifesto at last year’s general election say on the matter? It said:

“We will invest in more and better facilities, continuing to deliver 40 new hospitals by 2030”.

They repeated the promise even though the Department of Health and Social Care was putting contracts out to tender for hospital building that ran until 2035. They repeated that commitment even after the National Audit Office found that the Government

“will not now deliver 40 new hospitals by 2030.”

They repeated it even though the Government’s own infrastructure watchdog deemed it to be “unachievable.” No one thought that the promise would be met, yet the Conservative party made it anyway time and again.

Despite knowing this, when I walked into the Department of Health and Social Care on 5 July, what I discovered shocked me. The scheme was not just years behind schedule; the money provided by the previous Government was due to run out in March, just weeks from today. On 25 May 2023, the then Health and Social Care Secretary, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), stood at this Dispatch Box and told the House:

“Today’s announcement confirms more than £20 billion of investment”.—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2023; Vol. 733, c. 480.]

The truth is that no funding had been set aside for future years; the money simply was not there. This was a programme built on the shaky foundation of false hope.

If I was shocked by what I discovered, patients ought to be furious—not just because the promises made to them were never going to be kept, but because they can see when they go into hospital how badly the health service needs new buildings. The NHS is quite literally crumbling. Lord Darzi’s independent investigation found that the NHS was starved of capital investment by the previous Government. Its outdated estate has hit productivity, with services disrupted at 13 hospitals every day during 2022-23. I have visited hospitals where the roof has fallen in and where pipes regularly leak and even freeze over in winter. The Conservatives literally did not fix the roof when the sun was shining.

On Thursday, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority published its annual report for 2023-24. Its assessment of the new hospital programme read:

“There are major issues with project definition, schedule, budget, quality and/or benefits delivery, which at this stage do not appear to be manageable or resolvable. The project may need re-scoping and/or its overall viability reassessed.”

That is what this Government have done.

Our review of the new hospital programme and the announcement I am making today will do two things: first, it will put the programme on a firm footing with sustainable funding, so that all the projects can be delivered; and, secondly, it will give patients an honest, realistic and deliverable timetable that they can believe in. This Labour Government are rebuilding our NHS, and as we do so, we will also rebuild trust in politics.

The seven hospitals built wholly or mostly from reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—RAAC—were outside the scope of the review. These will be rebuilt at pace to protect people’s safety. Also out of scope were the hospitals already under construction or with an approved business case, where building works have continued without delay.

Working closely with my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, we have secured five-year waves of investment, backed by £15 billion of investment over consecutive waves, averaging £3 billion a year. That funding is in addition to the £1 billion that the Chancellor announced at the Budget to tackle dangerous RAAC and the backlog of critical maintenance, repairs and upgrades across the NHS estate. It is also in addition to the £1.5 billion we are investing in new surgical hubs, diagnostic scanners and beds. Together, it forms part of the £13.6 billion of capital investment announced at the Budget, which is the largest capital investment in our national health service since Labour was last in office.

I will now set out the new timetable. Projects in wave zero are already in the advanced stages of development and will be completed within the next three years. These are: the Bamburgh unit, phase 3 of the care environment development and re-provision, or CEDAR programme; the national rehabilitation centre in Nottinghamshire; Oriel eye hospital; Royal Bournemouth hospital; St Ann’s hospital; Alumhurst Road children’s mental health unit; and Dorset county hospital.

Wave 1 schemes will begin construction between 2025 and 2030. These include the seven RAAC hospitals: Leighton hospital; West Suffolk hospital; Frimley Park hospital; Hinchbrook hospital; Queen Elizabeth hospital; James Paget hospital; and Airedale general hospital. The other wave 1 schemes are: Poole hospital, Milton Keynes hospital; the 3Ts hospital—trauma, tertiary and training—in Brighton; the women and children’s hospital, Cornwall; Derriford emergency care hospital; Cambridge cancer research hospital; Shotley Bridge community hospital; North Manchester general hospital; and Hillingdon hospital.

Wave 2 schemes will now begin main construction between 2030 and 2035. They are: Leicester general hospital and Leicester royal infirmary; Watford general hospital, the specialist and emergency care hospital in Sutton; Kettering general hospital; Leeds general infirmary; Musgrove Park hospital; Princess Alexandra hospital; Torbay hospital; and Whipps Cross hospital, where I should declare an interest, as it serves my constituency.

Wave 3 includes nine schemes that will start construction between 2035 and 2039: St Mary’s hospital in London; Charing Cross hospital and Hammersmith hospital; North Devon district hospital; Eastbourne district general hospital, Conquest hospital and Bexhill hospital; Hampshire hospitals; Royal Berkshire hospital; Royal Preston hospital; the Royal Lancaster infirmary; and the Queen’s medical centre and Nottingham city hospital.

Following this statement, further details of the hospital building programme will be published on my Department’s website and a copy of the report will be placed in the House of Commons Library. In addition, the Minister for Secondary Care will hold meetings tomorrow, to which MPs of all parties are invited, to answer any further questions about these projects.

To ensure that every penny of taxpayers’ money is well spent and every hospital is delivered as quickly as possible, we will shortly launch a new framework for the construction of the new schemes. This will be a different way of contracting by working in partnership with industry to mitigate cost, schedule and delivery risks and saving money through a standardised design approach. That will speed up the process of opening new hospitals and provide a foundation for a collaborative supply-chain partnership. We will also appoint a programme delivery partner in the coming weeks to support the delivery of crucial hospital infrastructure across the country and provide programme, project and commercial expertise.

I know that patients in some parts of the country will be disappointed by this new timetable—they are right to be. They were led up the garden path by three Conservative Prime Ministers, all promising hospitals with no credible plan for funding to deliver them, and by Conservative MPs, who stood on a manifesto promise they knew could never be kept. We will not treat the British people with the same contempt. We will never play fast and loose with the public’s trust.

The plan that we have laid out today is honest, funded and can actually be delivered. It is a serious, credible plan to build the hospitals that our NHS needs. It is part of the biggest capital investment that the NHS has seen since Labour was last in office, delivering not just more hospitals but new surgical hubs, community diagnostic centres, AI-enabled scanners, radiotherapy machines, modern technology, new mental health crisis centres and upgrades to hundreds of GP estates. It will take time, but this Labour Government are determined to rebuild our NHS and rebuild trust in politics. I commend this statement to the House.

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

4.47 pm

**Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con):** I am grateful, as always, to the Secretary of State for his typical courtesy in giving me advance sight of his statement. Labour was prepared to make all sorts of promises in opposition to win power—it promised not to raise taxes on working people, it said that it would not cut the winter fuel payment, and it promised to deliver the new hospital programme—but just as working people, pensioners, farmers and businesses have found, this is a Labour Government of broken promises. They have cynically betrayed the trust of the British people.

[Edward Argar]

The Secretary of State and the Chancellor travelled the country to meet candidates who were promising a new hospital in their local area. In fact, despite my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) calling them out in this very place in May last year, warning that Labour had said in the small print of its health missions that it was planning to pause all this capital investment, the Secretary of State was quoted in the *Evening Standard* in June last year to have said:

“We are committed to delivering the New Hospitals Programme”.

Those are seemingly hollow words now that those hospitals are at risk, with the investment and upgrades they deserve pushed back potentially to start in some cases as late as 2039. Voters put their trust in the Labour party to deliver on its promises, yet today they have been let down.

In response to claims that that is perhaps because of Labour’s economic inheritance, that simply does not reflect reality. Before the Secretary of State warms to the theme of the mythical £22 billion black hole, he will know that the Office for Budget Responsibility has simply failed to recognise that figure. Let us also be clear that, due to the Labour party and the Chancellor’s financial mismanagement at the Budget and the rise in gilts, the BBC recently estimated that the cost of borrowing could be £10 billion higher over this Parliament. Just imagine what the Secretary of State could have announced today if the Chancellor of the Exchequer had not caused that.

To govern is to choose: what to spend money on, what to invest in, and what not to invest in. The Secretary of State rightly pointed out that the Darzi review highlighted the need for more capital investment in the NHS, yet he has decided not to prioritise the delivery of these new hospitals in a rapid fashion. He will also know how the Treasury allocates funding, with cash earmarked to the end of a spending review period but not going across it until that comprehensive spending review formally concludes—that is what his Government are now doing.

The Secretary of State will be aware that the previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), was very clear about the £20 billion anticipated in the next CSR to fund this. Let me be clear: we prioritised the delivery of these new hospitals, as my right hon. Friend did in his statement on RAAC on 25 May 2023, setting out the Government’s commitment to fund them. This Secretary of State has not replicated that.

We had a clear plan, with that funding commitment to be formalised at the CSR, to approve, build and complete new hospitals to a definition akin to that used by Tony Blair when building new hospitals, which were already being designed to a standardised approach with modern methods of construction. The Secretary of State has put that progress at risk. Will he confirm that in his CSR discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the capital departmental expenditure limit—CDEL—allocation for his Department, he will prioritise the new hospital programme? When will the Secretary of State set out to local people in each area exactly when construction will start? I declare an interest:

University Hospitals of Leicester NHS trust serves my constituents. In each case, when will the doors actually open?

If the Chancellor fails to get the economy growing and starts looking yet again for cuts to fill the hole that she created with her Budget, will the Secretary of State rule out any further delays? What is his assessment of the effect of his lengthening the programme’s timescales on costs, given inflationary pressures? Are all other previously approved capital projects and programmes safe from review? Can he possibly update the House—via the Library if not here—on his latest assessment of the impact of RAAC in those hospitals, which rightly he is continuing to prioritise?

Today’s announcement will come as a bitter blow to trusts, staff and, crucially, patients, who believed the Labour party and will now be left waiting even longer for vital investment. Yet again, before the election, they talked the talk, but patients lose out when this Government fail to deliver. In yet again kicking the can down the road, as is increasingly their habit, they have sadly betrayed the trust of the British people.

**Wes Streeting:** This weekend the Leader of the Opposition said that she will be honest about the mistakes of the Conservative Government. It seems that the shadow Health Secretary did not get the memo. If the Leader of the Opposition is serious about showing some contrition, she might want to start here. In 2020 the Department of Health and Social Care requested funds from the Treasury to rebuild the seven RAAC hospitals. That request was denied, setting back the necessary rebuild of those hospitals by years. The shadow Secretary of State will remember this, as he was a Minister in the Department at the time. Which of his colleagues was a Treasury Minister when it blocked the rebuild of the RAAC hospitals? The Leader of the Opposition. That is her record. She should apologise.

Once again, like the arsonist returning to the scene of the crime to criticise the fire brigade for not responding fast enough, the Conservatives have the audacity to come here and talk about a failure to deliver, when promise after promise was broken. The shadow Secretary of State was the Chief Secretary to the Treasury who had to come in to clean up the mess caused by Liz Truss’s mini-Budget. That is what crashing the economy looks like. They still have not had the decency, even under new leadership, to apologise.

If the shadow Health Secretary genuinely believes that all these projects could be delivered by 2030—the commitment in the Conservatives’ manifesto—I invite him to publish today their plan for doing it. How would he ensure the funding, labour supply, building materials and planning to build the remaining projects in the next five years? Which capital programmes would he cut? Which taxes would he increase? He knows as well as anyone that those are the choices that face Government.

While he is doing that, can the shadow Health Secretary tell us what he can see that the National Audit Office, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and the eyes in my head cannot see? What was the Conservatives’ plan past March, when the money runs out? What taxes would they have raised? I wonder what capital projects they would have cut in order to invest even more than we are in hospital buildings—the biggest capital investment since Labour was last in office.

While he is answering those questions, the shadow Healthy Secretary might want to reflect, with the shadow Cabinet and with Members on the Benches behind him, on the other messes that this Government are having to clear up. As I look around the Cabinet table, I see an Education Secretary dealing with crumbling schools, a Justice Secretary without enough prison places, a Defence Secretary dealing with a more dangerous world, a Transport Secretary having to rebuild our crumbling infrastructure, and a Deputy Prime Minister building the homes we need—in short, dealing with multiple crises of the Conservatives' making. There is a massive rebuilding job to do in Britain, and we are getting on with it.

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I think my point will be unlike that of any other Member in the House. The specialist emergency care hospital in Sutton is in tier 2 of these schemes. Can I say to the Secretary of State, as I have said to every Health Secretary over the past 25 years, that no one wants this? We want the services at St Helier hospital to remain at St Helier, where the people who are poorest and most ill need them. Will he look at this £500 million-pound scheme to see if it is really necessary?

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: I think that will be a unique representation this afternoon. I can already hear the vultures swooping, looking for that capital allocation and slot in the pipeline. She has made the case repeatedly, forcefully and with conviction that these services should remain in a community with high levels of deprivation and high need. I know that the Minister for Secondary Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), has already committed to meeting her, and we are very happy to have those conversations with her.

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

**Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): In Hampshire and across the country in 2019 and 2024, Conservative MPs stood on the promise of delivering new hospitals, including one for Hampshire. However, it turned out that there was never any funding for that, and that those were just false promises to try to get votes. I have fought tirelessly to save and improve Winchester's A&E and consultant-led maternity unit. With the announcement that construction of a proposed new hospital in Hampshire will not even start until between 2037 and 2039, we absolutely need to ensure that the current services are invested in and improved so that they remain fit for purpose.

Given that the new hospital programme is delayed, it is more urgent than ever to increase capacity by fixing social care, so that those who are well enough to leave hospital can be cared for in the community, thus freeing up beds immediately. We cannot endure both insufficient social care packages and crumbling hospitals. Given this delay to the new hospital programme, will the Secretary of State commit to prioritising more social care packages now, rather than waiting three years for a review to be complete?

Although the Health Secretary is not responsible for the state of the NHS or the state of the economy, which the Government inherited, the new hospital programme was seen as part of the solution to the crisis in the NHS,

and people across the sector have warned that delaying the programme will only mean more treatments cancelled and more money wasted plugging holes in hospital buildings that are no longer fit for purpose. We are therefore concerned that one of the biggest announcements to affect the NHS over the next few years is coming out right now, during Donald Trump's inauguration, because it will not get the media attention it deserves. Liberal Democrats therefore urge the Health Secretary to promise to release a full impact assessment on how the delays to the new hospital programme will affect patients and NHS staff.

**Wes Streeting:** I will take those points in turn. With enormous respect for the momentous democratic event taking place in Washington today, I do not think that the new President, last time I checked, had declared an interest in any of our hospital schemes. I am sure he will forgive us for getting on with the job of British government, even as the American handover takes place.

I committed some time ago to coming to the House in the new year. I have kept that promise and I dare say that the decisions that we are taking and setting out today will receive good coverage. I reassure the hon. Gentleman, and other Members across the House with an interest in particular schemes, that my hon. Friend the Minister for Secondary Care and officials from the programme team will be happy to meet as early as tomorrow to take questions on individual schemes.

The hon. Gentleman raises broader challenges for the NHS and social care pressures in our country. That is why the Chancellor prioritised investment in our NHS and social care services in the Budget, with £26 billion of additional funding for my Department of Health and Social Care. On social care specifically, we have taken a number of actions in our first six months: fair pay agreements for care professionals, the biggest expansion of the carer's allowance since the 1970s and an uplift in funding for local authorities, including specific ringfenced funding for social care. We will be setting out further reforms throughout this year, as well as phase 1 of the Casey commission reporting next year for the duration for this Parliament.

Opposition Members cannot have it both ways. They cannot keep on welcoming the investment and opposing the means of raising it. If they do not support the Chancellor's Budget, which is their democratic right, they have to say which services they would cut or which alternative taxes they would raise. Welcome to opposition, folks. We've been there. Enjoy the ride: you'll be there for some time.

Finally, let me just say this to the Liberal Democrats, who have constructively raised a range of challenges. This is at the heart of the challenge facing this Government. The hon. Gentleman is right to mention the capital challenges facing the secondary care estate. The same is true of the primary care estate and of the community and mental health estates. As I have spelled out, every single one of my Cabinet colleagues also has significant capital pressures. That is the consequence of 14 years of under-investment in our public infrastructure and in our public services, which means that we are paying a hell of a lot more for the Conservatives' failure than we would have if they had built on, rather than demolished, Labour's record of the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction in history.

**Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Today's announcement is welcome for my constituents. It confirms that we are keeping the promises we made in 2023 to deliver Hillingdon hospital in the first term of a Labour Government. I thank my right hon. Friend for that commitment. We also know that, shamefully, my predecessor and his predecessor misled my constituents. My predecessor stood here, almost where I am standing today, and told my constituents that Hillingdon hospital was fully funded and that construction had started. We now know that that simply was not true. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that today's statement outlines a fully funded programme that is deliverable and an honest assessment of when hospitals will be delivered? Can he confirm that that is the case?

**Wes Streeting:** First, I thank my hon. Friend for his strong representations on behalf of his constituents, not just since his election, but before it. Between the by-election and his election to this place, he did not give up; he continued to fight for his community.

I stood outside Hillingdon hospital, having had a good look around at the state of the hospital and the plans for the reconstruction of the site. I am delighted to have kept my promise and this Government's promise, so that construction at Hillingdon hospital will begin in 2027-28. My hon. Friend is quite right to say that his predecessor and his predecessor's predecessor made claims about Hillingdon hospital that were not true. This Government will not make those mistakes. We will keep our promise. What we have set out for all schemes in the new hospital programme is a credible, realistic, funded timetable that this Government, for as long as there is a Labour Government, will actually deliver.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Will the Secretary of State forgive me if I give the House a few seconds' respite from the blame game by trying to make a positive suggestion? Everyone accepts that the real problem facing our hospitals is the number of frail and elderly people who do not need to be in hospital and should be in some sort of care facility. Does the Secretary of State agree that while building brand-new, all-singing, all-dancing hospitals is very expensive, there is a future for smaller cottage hospitals such as the one in Gainsborough and a case for opening other facilities so we can move elderly, frail people out of those big hospitals into a caring environment and free up space?

**Wes Streeting:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for a rare constructive contribution from the Conservative Benches—not rare from him, for he is regularly constructive; it is the rest of the Conservative party that we have a problem with. Let me reassure him that one thing we are determined to do is deliver a shift in the centre of gravity, out of hospitals and into communities, with care closer to home and indeed in people's homes. As I saw on a visit to Carlisle over the new year, good intermediate step-down accommodation sometimes provides better-quality and more appropriate care and better value for the taxpayer. That intermediate care facility in Carlisle, funded through the NHS by a social care setting, was providing great-quality rehabilitation in a nicer environment at half the cost of the NHS beds up the road. This Government will deliver both better care and better value for taxpayers.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am really glad that my right hon. Friend has a grip on the hospital building programme and has developed a pipeline for scheduling the new hospitals. York is not on the list, but given that it was one of the cheapest hospitals to build, it will certainly need to be there in 10 to 15 years. How will my right hon. Friend review hospitals that are not on the list and schedule them into future programmes?

**Wes Streeting:** We keep a regular eye on the capital needs of the NHS across the board. Subject to the usual constraints on resources, supply chain construction industry capacity and so on, we will continue to do so. We are determined not to repeat the mistakes of our predecessors, but to ensure that the promises we make are promises we can keep.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Before the general election was called, there was a clear indication from the Government that they intended to fund the—only—£25 million reconstruction of the maternity unit at the QEQM hospital in Margate, which emerged from the Bill Kirkup report. I will be grateful if the Secretary of State can tell me whether it is his intention to ensure that that funding is made available.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the number of houses that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is determined to see built. Could he explain, for the sake of East Kent, how the primary and secondary healthcare services will be provided to meet the needs of the people who will live in those houses?

**Wes Streeting:** I am very aware of the challenges in East Kent and the challenges of providing good-quality care and the facilities that people need. I am sure that Ministers will be happy to receive representations from the right hon. Gentleman.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about the Government's commitment to building 1.5 million more homes. Let me reassure him and the House that the Deputy Prime Minister and I, as well as other members of the Cabinet, are discussing very carefully how we can make sure that alongside the new homes that our country needs, we have the infrastructure and the public services that people deserve.

**Ben Coleman** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): My predecessor in Chelsea and Fulham claimed to have secured funding for Charing Cross hospital. That claim went out on election literature throughout the constituency. At the time, I doubted it. Today's announcement confirms beyond any doubt that the money was not there. What he was saying was not true.

I welcome the honesty and realism of the Government's statement today. It is about time the British people had a Government playing straight with them and telling them the truth. *[Interruption.]* Instead of laughing and jeering from the Conservative Benches, which is of no use to my constituents in Chelsea and Fulham who were promised the money for Charing Cross hospital when it was never there, I would like to see some contrition. On a more positive note, can the Secretary of State assure my constituents that the timetable that he has set out will be met?

**Wes Streeting:** I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I thank him for the very strong representations that he has made on behalf of his local trust since his election to this House. I am afraid that the extent to which promises were made about this scheme that could not be kept is shameful. I can reassure him that pre-construction work will take place between 2030 and 2035. As he knows, this is not a straightforward project, but it is one to which we are very much committed, with construction due to start around 2036. I am very happy to continue to work with my hon. Friend and with neighbouring right hon. and hon. Members to make sure that the trust is supported during that period, given the day-to-day challenges that it faces.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The acute hospital that serves most of my constituency is the Royal Lancaster infirmary. It is an overcrowded Victorian hospital; parts of it are falling to bits, it has inadequate parking and it is at the wrong end of a one-way system. With the Secretary of State's help, the local hospital trust has acquired an almost perfect site for a rebuild. The trust has designed the new hospital and even begun consulting the public on it, so today's announcement that we face a 10-year wait until a spade is dug into the ground will come as something of a bombshell. Will he reconsider the timescale? The longer we leave it, the more the cost will spiral and, I am afraid, the less likely it is that people will have confidence that it will even happen at all.

**Wes Streeting:** On the hon. Gentleman's final point, I can well understand why people across the country will be cynical about commitments made on hospitals, given the experience that they had under our Conservative predecessors. Even if not every decision that we are taking is universally popular, I hope that people will appreciate our up-front candour and honesty in not trying to pull the wool over their eyes, and in setting out in today's report, in terms, the timetable for pre-construction work and for starting construction.

In the particular case that the hon. Gentleman raises, I hope that the fact that land was acquired by this Government in December 2024 signals our absolute commitment to the scheme. If we were not committed to the scheme, we would not have made the land purchase up front ahead of pre-construction works, which are planned for 2030. We did so because we absolutely accept the case that he makes about the desirability of the site and the need for investment and the new hospital locally. In addition to the representations from the hon. Gentleman, my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) wins the award for being the first MP to collar me straight after the election to say, "Buy this land and do it now."

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): After years of broken Tory promises on new hospitals, can the Secretary of State confirm today that, following this review, my constituents in Blaydon and Consett can at last be confident that we have an honest, realistic and deliverable timetable that they can believe in?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the representations that she has consistently made since before the general election. I think her constituents will particularly welcome the investment in Shotley Bridge

community hospital, which will be in wave 1, with construction starting in 2026-27. I know that that is not the only need for health and care provision in her constituency; we will continue to work together to make sure that her constituents experience an improving NHS, as opposed to being lumbered with the broken one that was left behind by the Conservatives.

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): This announcement will come as a terrible blow to the people served by Basingstoke and North Hampshire hospital, particularly after the very personal commitment made by the now Prime Minister in June 2024. We assume from what the Secretary of State has said today that, come the spending review, the Government will set out detailed capital budgets stretching into the 2040s. Can he tell us in the meantime what his announcement will do to his projections for operating costs, for repairs and maintenance costs and for the provision of stopgap facilities where they are needed?

**Wes Streeting:** Given that the right hon. Gentleman served in the Cabinet under successive Conservative Governments, he has some brass neck, frankly, in turning up today and complaining in the way that he has. He wants to talk about the costs placed on the country, but he should look in the mirror and consider the costs that he and his colleagues in government lumbered this country with when they imposed over a decade of austerity, of Trussonomics and the worst sort of kamikaze ideological project that this country has experienced in modern times.

I would just remind the right hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* I remind him and those on the Conservative Benches who are living in an alternate reality where they bear no responsibility for their actions of only months ago, that the National Audit Office said:

"By the definition the government used in 2020, it will not now deliver 40 new hospitals by 2030."

The Infrastructure and Projects Authority gave the scheme a red rating, saying that

"the project appears to be unachievable... The project may need re-scoping and/or its overall viability reassessed."

What on earth does he think that record did for NHS managers, given the stop-start, stop-start? What on earth does he think that did to communities who were seeking certainty and assuming that the promises made by the Conservatives would be kept? They said in their manifesto only last July that they would deliver 40 new hospitals by 2030. Well, according to the NAO's definition and the IPA's report, that promise was never going to be kept. They knew it. They did not care. They just said what they wanted to try to win votes, and that is disgraceful.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. Members will have seen how many people are on their feet wanting to ask the Secretary of State a question. Could I ask Members please to try to keep their questions and answers quite short? I want to try to get everybody in, if at all possible.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend's statement stands in sharp contrast to that made on 25 May 2023 by the previous

[Graham Stringer]

Secretary of State, when he completely forgot to put in his statement, both written and verbal, North Manchester general hospital. I am pleased that North Manchester general hospital is today in the first wave, but I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend could spell out in detail when the work will continue, because in one of the areas of the country with the worst health outcomes, it is not only a hospital scheme; it is an urban regeneration scheme, and some work has started. Will that work be allowed to continue? Can he give me some details, please?

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is right about the sorry state that North Manchester general hospital has been left in by our Conservative predecessors, not least the critical infrastructure risk at that hospital. Most of the existing estate dates back to the 1870s, and NHS leaders, managers and staff are having to deal with multiple day-to-day operational issues, including poor fabric and fire safety, ventilation, asbestos and water management issues. That is why I am delighted to confirm to my hon. Friend that the work will continue and construction will start in 2027-28. I am looking forward to working with him, other Greater Manchester MPs, the leader of the city council and the Mayor of Greater Manchester to make sure that this project delivers for the health and the wider economic benefits and needs of the people of Greater Manchester.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): Given how Government finance works, the Secretary of State knows that he has, in effect, cancelled the replacement of Basingstoke and North Hampshire hospital. That is despite, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said, the now Prime Minister going there during the election campaign and making a specific, unequivocal and unconditional promise that the hospital would be replaced by 2030. Sadly, it looks like that will now not be the case. I am sure the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy), who is in the Chamber, will be considering his position, given the promises he made.

Are we able to rescue something from this wreckage by purchasing the site? As the Secretary of State will know, we are now likely to lose the land. It is a critical site, so can we please buy it before it slips from our grasp?

**Wes Streeting:** We are happy to receive sensible representations from Members about their projects, as we have from my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy). It is a bit rich for Conservative Members to talk about understanding how public finances work.

**Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): Last autumn, I met the Secretary of State to discuss the rebuild of the RAAC-infested Airedale general hospital. I reiterate my thanks on behalf of my constituents, who are being treated in wards with propped-up ceilings, for his and the ministerial team's commitment to ensuring that this vital new hospital goes ahead with a deliverable timetable and a sustainable funding plan.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the previous Government's commitment to delivering 40 new hospitals by 2030 was, as the NAO concluded, disingenuous and "unrealistic"?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. We are very fortunate to have in the House someone with her experience of social care and health issues. She has already done an outstanding job representing her constituents, who I know will not only welcome the news that Airedale general hospital will begin construction in 2027-28 but will be appalled that, as a RAAC hospital, work could have been well under way had the Department's request for funding not been denied by the woman who is now the leader of the Conservative party.

**Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): I sympathise with the Secretary of State for having to pull these projects out of the fire of non-funding, and I thank him for the announcement on the women and children's hospital in Cornwall. I know that all my parliamentary colleagues in Cornwall will be delighted at today's news. I sympathise with colleagues who find themselves in waves 2 and 3. What can the Secretary of State do to crack on with the enabling work to ensure that this project is delivered in double-quick time? It is desperately needed, and a 2030 finish date will be challenging for Cornwall. It would be much appreciated if it could be brought forward.

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful for the way in which the hon. Gentleman poses his question. I can confirm that pre-construction work is ongoing, with construction due to start between 2027 and 2029.

A lot has been said about what my party said before the election, and I will give Opposition Members a role model in how to do honesty ahead of an election. I stood outside the Royal Cornwall hospital and was asked by local media whether I would commit to a specific timetable, and I said, "We have committed to the new hospitals programme. We are committed to seeing through the new women and children's hospital at the Royal Cornwall, and I know that enabling work is under way. Beyond that, we are going to take an honest look at the books." That is the approach I took as shadow Health and Social Care Secretary, and that is how to do it—to under-promise and then over-deliver.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): Leeds general infirmary received outline planning permission in 2020. Two Conservative Prime Ministers came to Leeds and promised that we would get our new hospital, despite knowing that the funding was not there in the Treasury.

I thank my right hon. Friend for visiting the LGI. Now that we know we are in wave 2, will he meet me and the chief executive to talk about one of the largest maintenance backlogs in the NHS, how we are going to cope in the intervening period, and how we are going to move forward and hit wave 2 running to get our hospital built before we need to close down our children's services, which are at risk?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the extent to which Leeds general infirmary was let down over 14 years of Conservative Government, with initial under-investment followed by total inactivity, apart from a big pile of dirt outside the hospital, which I went to see with the then shadow Chancellor. The Chancellor and I are both committed to the project: we know how important it is. We have had to phase the

programme so we can say it is genuinely affordable, deliverable and credible on this timetable. I reassure my hon. Friend that pre-construction work will take place over 2030 to 2032, with construction due to start in 2033 to 2035. We would be delighted to receive representations from MPs from his city and across the region about the support we provide to the trust in the meantime.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Airedale hospital has some of the worst RAAC of all the hospitals on the new hospital programme. All the surveys have said that given the risk profile associated with RAAC, parts of the hospital will have no life expectancy beyond 2030, which is why the completion date of 2030 was so important. With funds having been allocated to the project for it to be delivered, it is disappointing to hear today that the start date will be between 2025 and 2030. When is it likely that the new, rebuilt Airedale hospital will open? Will the Health Secretary provide the trust with confidence that additional funds will be available to help with the mitigation that needs to take place before the new hospital can open, to keep the existing hospital operational?

**Wes Streeting:** If the hon. Gentleman is disappointed with this Government, he will be absolutely furious when he finds out who was in power before. In fact, he is a dead ringer for the guy I used to see on the Conservative Benches cheering on and voting for every calamitous decision the Conservative Government took, including crashing the economy and supporting the now Leader of the Opposition when she rejected appeals to fund RAAC hospitals. We are prioritising those hospitals and going as fast as we can. The rebuilding will happen under a Labour Government, but it did not happen under the Tories, did it?

**Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the honesty with which my right hon. Friend is approaching this matter, because Governments should not make false promises. I had the chance to visit a couple of the RAAC hospitals, and the Public Accounts Committee, which I used to chair, examined Hospital 2.0, the standardised approach he talked about. It contained some quite startling assumptions, so will he assure me and the House that he has looked into those in detail and that we are absolutely sure about the dates of delivery?

**Wes Streeting:** I reassure my hon. Friend that the approach we are taking, particularly the steps in the coming weeks on the outline for key delivery and the appointment of a partner, give me the confidence and assurance to know that the timetable we have set out is affordable and credible. I am always happy to receive advice and representations from my hon. Friend, who knows a huge amount about what she speaks about.

**Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): In a few weeks' time, I will celebrate my 42nd birthday. I was born at the Royal Berkshire hospital in Newbury, and given the Secretary of State's announcement today, I will be celebrating my 60th birthday when the new hospital is due to open. Will the Secretary of State talk us through how operational budgets will be increased at hospitals such as the Royal Berkshire, which currently has a backlog of repairs of over £200 million that could stop

operations and procedures happening? How will the Government ensure that money is in place while we wait 14 years for our new hospital?

**Wes Streeting:** I will be getting to 42 slightly earlier than the hon. Gentleman, as it is my 42nd birthday tomorrow—I look forward to the cards in the post.

More seriously, on the phasing of the programme, we have taken an approach that ensures that we can stand up and look his constituents and others in the eye, and say that we have an affordable programme that can be delivered according to the timetable that is set out. I know people will be disappointed by the length of time it will take and I am genuinely sorry that they were led up the garden path by our predecessors. That is why we have taken an approach that says that honesty is the best policy. We would rather be up front about the length of time and in the meantime ensure we are delivering the investment and reform needed to reduce waiting times and improve primary, community and social care services, so even as work continues to prepare for the Royal Berkshire hospital scheme, his constituents and others across Berkshire will begin to experience an improving NHS under Labour, as opposed to the broken one they experienced under the Conservatives.

**Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): While I welcome the firm commitment that the Secretary of State has made to a new Royal Berkshire hospital, my constituents will share my disappointment at the delay to its construction. I agree that the blame for the delay lies squarely with the Conservatives, who promised new hospitals without setting aside the money to pay for them, but will my right hon. Friend visit the Royal Berkshire hospital to discuss the interim capital funding that we will need as we wait for wave 3, and to see for himself how important it is that our new hospital is built as soon as possible?

**Wes Streeting:** No one has fought harder for the Royal Berkshire hospital scheme than my hon. Friend, and our hon. Friends the Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and for Reading Central (Matt Rodda), who are sitting beside her. They have worked incredibly hard as a team to make the case for investment in health and social care across Berkshire. I would be delighted to visit, because she is right that even as people wait for this particular hospital scheme there is a lot that we can, must and will do to improve health and social care services across her constituency and across Berkshire. I look forward to working with my hon. Friends to achieve that.

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Health Secretary has recognised the urgency of replacing the Queen Elizabeth hospital in King's Lynn due to the RAAC safety issues. My constituents and I are grateful for that; it reflects the position of the last Conservative Government. In his statement, he said that he was working at pace to rebuild QEH, so will he instruct the NHS to expedite the business case approvals for the new multi-storey car park, which is the key enabling project, and will he commit to the 2030 deadline, which is the end of life of the hospital?

**Wes Streeting:** We recognise the challenge of RAAC in the Queen Elizabeth hospital in King's Lynn, and took that approach from the outset. I can confirm that

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the programme will start construction in 2027-28. It is due to complete in 2032-33 but will be prioritised for expedition as a RAAC scheme. If we can go faster, we will. Today I am setting out a credible timetable. If we are able to under-promise and over-deliver, I will be delighted, but I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are going as far and as fast as we can, given the safety challenges. If he is not happy with the pace, he should reflect on the fact that one of the local MPs was a former Prime Minister. She had the chance to get on with it. I hope I do not get a legal letter, but she did not deliver, did she?

**Ms Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): For nearly 25 years, I have been part of campaigns to either save or rebuild Whipps Cross hospital. For the last 10 years, I have stood shoulder to shoulder with the Secretary of State, so I know—let me put this on the record for him, because he cannot say it—his pain and frustration that we are now talking about eight years to restart the building works that have already started at Whipps Cross, and which will finally deliver the new hospital that we need and a thousand new homes in our community. It is devastating to us all, but we can see from the list that some hospitals have moved between the different waves. Given that, and given the examples of funding sources that can be put together, will he organise an urgent meeting—we know about his conflict of interest—for all MPs whose constituents use Whipps Cross, to look at the criteria and possible new sources of funding? I know that he will agree that we owe it to our constituents not to give up fighting for the hospital that our community so desperately needs.

**Wes Streeting:** As my hon. Friend says, I must declare an interest, as Whipps Cross hospital and Barts health NHS trust serve my constituents. I would be delighted to lead a delegation with her to lobby the Minister of State for health, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who has to take decisions on schemes that affect my constituency. It would be nice to be on the other side of exchanges for the first time in a while. Let me reassure the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), and my own, that pre-construction work on Whipps Cross hospital is due to begin in 2029 to 2031, with construction beginning in 2032 to 2034. My constituents know me well enough to know that if we could go faster, we would do so. On alternative investment vehicles and means of raising additional capital investment—not to mention learning from some of the less successful initiatives of the past—I would be delighted to work with Treasury colleagues and Government Members on how we can get more capital investment, but for reasons that she will well understand, we need to tread carefully on that point.

**Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): The Secretary of State inherited Torbay hospital where we have had almost 700 sewage leaks, many of which have impacted clinical areas of the hospital and, sadly, that is set to continue. The hospital operates at 98% bed capacity, which only results in poorer services for residents, and that is set to continue. Will he reflect on the fact that many people in Torbay will fear they have suffered the impact of the national insurance hikes in our low-wage economy, but without seeing much of the gains for our hospital?

**Wes Streeting:** I say two things to the hon. Gentleman. First, we recognise the need for investment in Torbay hospital. We are committed to it, and that is what this programme commits us to deliver, with pre-construction work beginning from 2030 to 2032 and construction beginning in 2033 to 2035. Secondly, I say to him and other Opposition Members who oppose the decision that the Chancellor took in the Budget that they cannot welcome the investment on one hand and oppose the means of raising it on the other—unless, of course, they spell out which services they would cut or which alternative taxes they would increase. That is the challenge we face. The Chancellor has had to do a hell of a lot of heavy lifting to clean up the mess left by the Conservatives, and I support her decisions.

**Ms Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State—he is doing what he should be doing and what should have been done before: telling truth to the people and the Commons. I will not waste any time. I urge the Secretary of State to get his appropriate Minister, if not himself, to visit Whiston hospital and St Helens local authority. They will show him how things can work better than at present with proper integrated health and social care. I ask him to please pay a visit. It is worth it; he cannot afford not to go.

**Wes Streeting:** There's an offer I can't refuse. My hon. Friend is a great champion of health and care services in her community and has enormous experience in local government. We are always looking for best practice. We want to take the best of the NHS to the rest of the NHS, and we would be delighted to hear more about the success in her community.

**Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): As the Secretary of State will be aware, I and MPs from surrounding constituencies wrote to him at the beginning of December to talk about Watford general hospital. I am sure that I speak on behalf of the two Labour MPs, one Lib Dem and a Conservative colleague when I say we are disappointed that he has decided to delay reconstruction of Watford general until at least 2030. Notwithstanding my public disappointment and given that all six of us campaigned actively on investment in Watford general, the statement says that further details will be provided in the hospital building programme. If there are assumptions there that we wish to challenge—such as build cost—do we go to the Secretary of State or the Minister of State with those questions?

**Wes Streeting:** The Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), will be holding briefings tomorrow for Members from across the House and is happy to receive further questions. The hon. Member seems to be saying on the one hand to go faster, and on the other that he wants to challenge underlying assumptions in the scheme. He cannot have it both ways. As I said to some of his hon. Friends, if he is disappointed with this Government as we clean up the mess they left behind, goodness knows the self-loathing he felt when they were in government.

**Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I feel doubly blessed this afternoon because the West Suffolk hospital in my constituency is to be rebuilt

and the James Paget hospital where I have worked for 30 years is to be rebuilt. Does the Secretary of State agree that our primary care estate is in a terrible situation and that we must also invest in general practice facilities?

**Wes Streeting:** With that track record, my hon. Friend might want to tell us this week's lottery numbers while he is here. In all seriousness, he makes a good point. Although today's statement is about the new hospital programme, the challenges across the health and social care estate are enormous. That is why the Chancellor committed at Budget to the capital investment that will deliver not only this programme but a significant investment in the general practice estate. We have an enormous array of capital challenges in health and social care. I ask Members on both sides of the House to bear in mind that while I have to struggle to weigh up the competing priorities across the health and social care budget, the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury have to do so not only for health and social care, but for education, transport, defence, justice, the police estate—right across the board, we have inherited a country left in an enormous hole. We are taking the necessary decisions to get our country out of that hole and beat a path to a better future.

**Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con):** One of the hospitals that my constituents and wider Buckinghamshire residents rely on for treatment is Wycombe hospital. It is not a RAAC hospital, but severe maintenance issues in the ageing tower mean that it is losing about 2,000 hours of operating time per year. In the spirit of the transparency that the Secretary of State speaks of, will he tell the House where the elongation of the new hospital programme leaves the works at Wycombe hospital, and will he meet me to discuss constructively how to move that work forward so that Wycombe can get the new surgical hub that it needs?

**Wes Streeting:** I am always open to constructive representations. As I said in my statement, the capital envelope that the Chancellor has given my Department—the biggest since Labour was last in office—includes funding for exactly those sorts of maintenance, backlog and disrepair challenges in the NHS estate. It is not just about new units or hospitals; it is also about ensuring that the current estate can deliver the quality of care and the value for money that our constituents deserve. I would be happy to take representations from the hon. Gentleman.

**Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab):** The Conservatives made promises about 40 new hospitals that they knew they could not build and deliver, and now it turns out that they knew they could not pay for them by 2030. It is little wonder that trust in politics is so low at the moment. It is also little wonder, given the unedifying display from Conservative Front Benches today, that they are sat on the Opposition Benches. It falls on this Government to take the decisions that the Conservatives ducked when they were in power. Given that trust is so low, what reassurances can the Secretary of State give my constituents that the Leeds general infirmary will be delivered according to the timetable that he has set out today?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his representation and for his outstanding work for the people of Leeds since his election. I can reassure his

constituents that this is a credible and funded timetable that we can stick to—and I am determined to ensure that we do. As for promises made by the Conservatives, we saw the crocodile tears from the Leader of the Opposition this weekend. She says that she will admit that the Conservatives got things wrong, but she never, ever gives a specific example. In fact, we have heard more about steak sandwiches than humble pie since the election.

**Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD):** The previous Conservative Government promises the people of west Hertfordshire that we would have a new hospital, and they even claimed that it was fully funded, so our sense of betrayal is incredibly acute. Today, the Labour Government have announced that the rebuild start for Watford general hospital has been pushed back by seven to nine years, without Ministers having even visited the hospital, even though it is shovel-ready. We have the land, we have the planning permission and we have done the enabling work, so can the Secretary of State say why 23 hospitals are ahead of Watford general, and what money will be made available for repair bills, which will inevitably pile up, possibly for the best part of a decade, while our hospital is left to crumble?

**Wes Streeting:** I can well understand the hon. Member's anger on behalf of her St Albans constituents, who are invested in this project, as are the constituents of my hon. Friends the Members for Watford (Matt Turmaine) and for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor). She will be able to see in the report, which we are placing online and in the Library, the methodology that we followed to assess prioritisation and ordering of schemes, which was about affordability, deliverability and the other factors that she would expect us to take into account. That is how we reached today's decision. I can reassure her and her constituents that pre-construction work will begin from 2028 to 2030, with construction beginning in 2031 to 2033. Those of her constituents who are angry about the delays do not need to be told where the blame lies. That is why they returned a Liberal Democrat MP instead of a Conservative.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. I plan to run this statement until 6 o'clock, so I ask Members to please help each other out by keeping their questions and answers short.

**Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab):** My predecessor told my constituents that the work on Kettering general hospital was ready to go. It is shameful that, in reality, the Conservatives had no credible plan, and the money was going to run out in March this year. Does the Secretary of State agree that people in Kettering are right to be angry at the previous Government for breaking their promises, and can he reassure my constituents that they will see a realistic, deliverable timeframe for the rebuild of our hospital?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has raised this issue consistently and persistently with me since she was elected. I can reassure her and her constituents that pre-construction work will begin from 2028 to 2030, with construction starting in 2031 and

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lasting until 2032. I am extremely sorry that my hon. Friend's constituents were led up the garden path; I rather feel that they have already rumbled the Conservatives by sending her to Parliament, but for as long as there is a Labour Government, we will deliver for the people of Kettering.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): I will say it, because no one else has: many happy returns for tomorrow. I genuinely thought that you were in your mid-30s—that the Secretary of State was in his mid-30s.

**Edward Argar**: And Madam Deputy Speaker. [*Laughter.*]

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): She's happy with that!

**Lincoln Jopp**: I also congratulate the Secretary of State on coming to the Chamber with such a massive capital expenditure announcement and eliciting a saving with his answer to the first question from the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh).

One of the plans that went by the board in May, for reasons I have not quite got to the bottom of, was for the Staines health and wellbeing centre, which is one of only six community diagnostic hubs that NHS England has allocated in England. The funding got pulled in May; will the Secretary of State please have another look at it?

**Wes Streeting**: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for that question. I think he is going to go far in this place, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I would be delighted to look favourably on his representations about his local facilities.

**Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): My local hospital was not selected for the new hospital programme. While I am happy for colleagues who have received some certainty today on when work on their local hospital will start, does the Secretary of State recognise that there are hospitals the length and breadth of this country that are falling apart, and that staff and patients deserve better? Will he commit to considering a wider estate plan for the rest of the NHS estate, especially in east Kent?

**Wes Streeting**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, and for the outstanding work he has done representing his constituents since his election. He makes the really important point that, of the record investment that the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury have given to my Department for capital investment—the biggest allocation since Labour was last in government—£3 billion a year is allocated for the new hospitals programme. Eagle-eyed people have noticed that a sum much larger than £3 billion a year is available for capital investment, precisely because there is a need for improvement and modernisation of the existing estate right across the health and social care estate, as I know from the representations that are piling into my inbox from my constituents who use Queen's hospital in Romford. I can assure my hon. Friend that we are looking across the board at the capital need in the NHS and social care and prioritising accordingly, and I would be delighted to receive his representations.

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): Hinchingsbrooke hospital in Huntingdon is one of the RAAC hospitals for which funding has already been approved. That hospital will not be allocated grid space until quarter 1 of 2028, but it will need it by Q1 2027 in order to keep the build on track. Additionally, traffic around the hospital is frequently gridlocked. A vital new access road is part of the plans, but the land where it would go is owned by Cambridgeshire Constabulary and National Highways, who are yet to give up the additional land they acquired via compulsory purchase order when constructing Views Common Road. Will the Health Secretary meet me in order to work through those blockers—given that they are all being caused by Government agencies—and meet Hinchingsbrooke hospital's 2030 delivery date, and can he confirm that the 2030 date is still the target?

**Wes Streeting**: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his representations. This Government are on the side of the builders, not the blockers. I can confirm to him that we are determined to start Hinchingsbrooke in 2027-28. We work closely with the local project team, but we would be delighted to receive representations about his frustrations with the delivery of that project.

**Chris Curtis** (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): The last time the Secretary of State came to the Chamber to talk about the new hospital programme, I shared the story of taking my 93-year-old grandmother to accident and emergency at Milton Keynes hospital, only to be told when we got there that the wait time was nine and a half hours. I am afraid to say she was back there again earlier this month, and despite the tireless efforts of our incredible NHS staff, the brutal reality of 14 years of Tory neglect means she did not get the care she desperately needed and deserved. However, it is not just my family; this is the lived experience of countless people across my constituency. On behalf of my grandmother, my family, my friends and my neighbours, I thank the Secretary of State for doing what the previous Government failed to do, which is securing the extra funding needed for the new hospital in Milton Keynes. Can I ask that he continues to work with me and the other MPs across Milton Keynes to ensure we get spades in the ground as soon as possible?

**Wes Streeting**: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, who has done so much with his parliamentary neighbours in Milton Keynes and Bletchley to get this scheme delivered and going as fast as possible. He underlines how important this is: it is not just about bricks and mortar; it is about people's lives and life chances. He really brought that home with his powerful contribution. I can reassure him that pre-construction work is ongoing, with construction due to begin in 2027-28, which I know will be welcomed by people who use the hospital right across Milton Keynes and beyond.

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): My former constituency neighbour Councillor Steve Tuckwell chaired the planning committee that granted permission for the new Hillingdon hospital, which serves my constituents. For full disclosure, my wife works there as an NHS doctor. Those of us who are local residents saw pre-construction works under way, including sewerage, electrics and demolition and strip-out beginning in the building. Will the Secretary of State apologise to my constituents affected by this

for the delay that he has introduced to this project? Will he consider lobbying the Chancellor and the Prime Minister to cancel the Chagos islands deal, the cost of which alone would fund 10 new NHS hospitals?

**Wes Streeting:** It is truly extraordinary that we have a Conservative Member standing up and criticising a Labour Government for delivering the Hillingdon hospital project, which will begin construction—not pre-works, but delivering—in 2027-28, as I promised the people of Hillingdon. That is what we are delivering, and people should judge the contrast between a Labour Government who are delivering and not just Conservative Members, but a Conservative Prime Minister, who made promises on the 40 hospitals, did not follow through and walked away, leaving us to pick up the pieces.

**Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): First, I say happy birthday to the Secretary of State for tomorrow. I cannot think of a better birthday present than to give the people of Milton Keynes a new women's and children's hospital. We are a growing city, and nowhere is it more needed in terms of population per bed. Will he reassure my constituents that the money has been found and allocated, because they feel they were taken for mugs after the scheme was announced by the previous Government and the previous MPs more than four times, but was never funded and never delivered?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her birthday wishes, even after I announced the timetable that I know she and her constituents wanted. On a serious note, I think people will see the contrast between sending Conservative Members from Milton Keynes, with inaction and broken promises, and sending Labour Members from Milton Keynes who are delivering. I am delighted with the work and improvements we will be able to deliver for her constituents. I hope Members right across the House, whichever wave their hospital is in, know that this Government have set out a timetable that is credible and deliverable, and a funding package that will be delivered for as long as there is a Labour Government.

**Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): My constituents in North Devon were let down by the previous Government, and they will be utterly dismayed to find that the remotest hospital in England has been passed over again for essential repairs—it is now beyond 2035. Does the Department understand that if critical care and operating theatre facilities begin to fail within the next five years, as expected, there is no alternative critical care for patients for over 40 miles? I invite the Secretary of State to come to see for himself why investment is needed now, and to visit North Devon district hospital because it has not had a ministerial visit from this Government.

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for his question. I can tell his constituents that, since his arrival, he has been absolutely dogged in pursuit of health and care investment in his community. I say to his constituents that we will deliver against this timetable. The funding is there, and it will be there for as long as there is a Labour Government. In the meantime, we would be happy to work with him to make sure that rural communities such as his receive the investment they need, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Secondary Care or I would be delighted to visit at some point soon.

**Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): There is no doubt but that this statement will be met with a deal of anger and frustration by my constituents. The hospital in Basingstoke is badly needed, and they are not getting the healthcare they deserve. The right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) called on me to consider my position. I would call on him, were he still in his place, to consider his connection with reality, because there is absolutely no doubt where the blame for that anger and frustration should lie, and that is with Conservative Members. *[Interruption.]* They repeatedly told my constituents that the hospital was funded; it was not. They told us it would be delivered by 2030, but they themselves delayed this fictitious plan until 2033, and the right hon. Member has the gall to ask me to consider my position. I am surprised he could make it to the Chamber today, so weighed down he must have been by his brass neck.

That brings me to my question. I welcome the clarity that the Secretary of State has brought to the scheme and to the House today. A number of the hospitals in cohort 4, which includes Basingstoke hospital, have been moved forward, such as the hospitals in Milton Keynes and Kettering. I am of course delighted for my colleagues, but I would be interested to know why they have been moved, but Basingstoke is where it is. What confidence can the Secretary of State give my constituents that under our plan, unlike the previous Government's, they can be confident that Basingstoke hospital will be delivered as we have set out?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I am not surprised that Conservative Members tried to shout him down. They want to silence criticism of their record because they are ashamed of it. That is a simple fact. He is absolutely right about his parliamentary neighbour, who sat around the Cabinet table of the notorious Liz Truss, even as she crashed the economy, and then has the temerity to turn up and lecture other people about the sound management of public money. These people have no shame whatsoever, and they will have no credibility until they sincerely and honestly apologise to the country for the mess they made.

I am very happy to talk through with my hon. Friend and his constituents why his project has been phased as it has. There are a number of constraining factors—not just resources, but other factors such as allocation of land, planning and so on—but I reassure his constituents that we will deliver. I also reassure his constituents that, since his arrival in this place, he has been absolutely dogged and determined in speaking up for them and lobbying on their behalf.

**Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's clarification on the timing of the new Sutton specialist hospital, which will serve my constituency. I am really pleased that the project is going ahead, although the delay is disappointing. The current situation at Epsom and St Helier university hospitals NHS trust is not sustainable. The trust currently runs duplicate services across two sites, which makes staffing incredibly difficult. The physical estate is deteriorating faster than it can be fixed, and some of the buildings are older than the NHS itself. Could the Secretary of State set out how he intends to reduce waiting lists in Reigate, Redhill, Banstead and our villages in the short term in the light of the delay to this project?

**Wes Streeting:** I can reassure the hon. Member that the hospital is due to start construction from 2032 to 2034—although my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) had other ideas. On cutting waiting times, just earlier this month the Prime Minister and I published this Government's elective reform plan so that we can deliver the 18-week standard for referral to treatment, which has not been met for a decade. Had the hon. Member been here during the last Parliament, she would have been absolutely shocked at where the Conservatives led us: from the shortest waiting times and the highest patient satisfaction under Labour to the highest waiting lists and lowest patient satisfaction on record.

**Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Trust in the delivery of healthcare for my constituents has been damaged by 14 years of failed NHS policies and fake Tory promises for new hospitals—the Tories knew full well that they did not have the money to deliver them. They visited Whipps Cross five times for announcements but delivered nothing—not a brick, not a penny, and certainly no hospital. Although the delay confirmed today is disappointing, we welcome the honesty and the work to mitigate the impacts of Tory failure.

The campaign for Whipps Cross hospital is not over, however. As the Secretary of State's team knows, we will continue to make other Departments aware of the impact on their housing programmes and continue to seek their support on his behalf. I am grateful for his remarks earlier about meeting to look at alternative funding methods. Will the Secretary of State confirm that funding for remediation and maintenance works will be made available to get our hospital to its wave 2 start line?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to my parliamentary neighbour for his representation and reassure him and his constituents—and mine, for that matter—that thanks to the capital allocation at the Budget provided by the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who is in his place, we will be investing more in capital than at any point since Labour was last in office, because we recognise the capital funding pressures right across the NHS estate. We are determined to meet those pressures and clear up the mess that the Conservatives left behind.

I know that across the House and the country there will be real anger at the promises made by the Conservatives when people see that the timetable was a work of fiction and the money was not there. I hope it is of some reassurance to know that this Secretary of State represents a community that is also feeling let down by the actions of the Conservatives, as does the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The way in which we have phased this scheme, and the fact that both our schemes are in wave 2, should reassure people that we are doing as much as we can as fast as we can within the constraints. I hope that people will take some comfort from the honesty, credibility and affordability of the timetable we are setting out today. As long as there is a Labour Government, the new hospital programme will be delivered.

## Office for Value for Money

### TREASURY COMMITTEE

#### *Select Committee statement*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Treasury Committee. Dame Meg Hillier will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. These should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, not the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

6.3 pm

**Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): It gives me great pleasure to make a statement on the first report of the Treasury Committee in this Parliament, and I again thank the House for giving me the honour of occupying this position. Our first report is on the new Office for Value for Money.

There will not be a single Member who does not believe in value for money for our constituents, who pay for Government services through hard-earned taxes that they give grudgingly to be spent well. As the Chancellor herself has been very clear, the taxpayer is not an automatic cash machine and every penny of taxpayer money needs to be spent as well as possible. The notion of value for money is one we would all support. We also need transparency, and that is a large part of the role of Select Committees: to shine a light on Government actions. This is our first public report shining a light on the work of the Treasury.

The Office for Value for Money is a short-lived, year-long body that is expected to have 20 staff, including secondees from the National Audit Office and the evaluation taskforce in the Cabinet Office. It is headed by a chair, who told us that it would conduct a small number of studies mainly on a cross-departmental basis to identify better value for money across Government. When we spoke to the chair in our hearing at the end of December, we found that although it was supposed to have 20 members of staff, it only had 12 and all were below director-general level, so not the most senior civil servants. That total of 12 and the ultimate total of 20 will include secondees.

It had not ruled out in December using external consultants to bolster the skills it will need to deliver on its work. It had not yet decided at the end of December into which areas it would launch studies, and nor had it set the parameters for evaluating its effectiveness. The Committee was clear that having a body with a name we would all agree with the principle of is not enough; we want to see such a body deliver for our constituents.

We highlighted in our report that there is a risk of duplication. There are already a large number of bodies across Government that deliver on value for money, scrutinise Government, and shine a light on how money is spent: the National Audit Office, which has nearly 1,000 staff in Newcastle and London; the evaluation taskforce in the Cabinet Office, which evaluates projects across Government to make sure they are properly delivering; the new National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, which will be operational in the spring and brings together the previous Infrastructure and Projects Authority in a slightly different format.

There are also units in Departments that work to deliver on value for money in a range of areas, in particular the new arrangements for the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, with its centre for digital transformation of public services. The Cabinet Office also has a readiness programme, based on regulations arising from the Procurement Act 2023, called “Transforming public procurement”.

There is also the rainbow of books. If we walk into the Treasury and ask questions about the green book, the teal book and the magenta book—and there are others—we will learn that is an important infrastructure for how it issues guidance. The green book appraises policies, programmes and projects. The teal book provides guidance on project delivery in Government, including managing projects, programmes and portfolios—that has been in an internal trial since July 2024. The magenta book provides Treasury guidance on what to consider when designing evaluation.

There are also a number of frameworks, including the Government efficiency framework and the public value framework. Datasets are also provided, including the priority outcomes and metrics first set out in the spending review of 2020. One of the most crucial elements in delivering value for money is that every Department has outcome delivery plans addressing the meat and drink of what is going on in Government. As Secretaries of State sit and plan what they might have to deliver in the spending review coming up in June, they will be poring over those outcome delivery plans as they do their departmental review; each Department will have its own review to look at where money is being spent and what projects are being delivered.

Overarching this there is “Managing public money”, which covers the approach of all permanent secretaries, who are the accounting officers and are therefore responsible for answering for how taxpayers’ money is spent through the accounting processes of Government. Their accounting officer assessments have to fit in with that regime.

We all want to see value for money, but this young body is one-year long and is not yet well established. The risk of duplication is high, and we need to ensure that it delivers something special and different, and crucially that nowhere in the Office for Value for Money will Ministers be playing a role. They will have a key role in delivering on the spending review, but in my experience of over a decade of scrutinising public spending, Ministers can make promises but they are not always well delivered, which can drive up public spending if we are not careful.

It is vitally important that this body delivers as set out, so we have asked the Treasury to explain in more precise detail what it expects the Office for Value for Money to deliver, how it will evaluate its success, and what it wants to see in the long term from this body chaired by David Goldstone. We wish this body well, but the Committee is clear that at the moment there are a number of areas of concern about whether it will actually deliver what it is set out to do.

**Dame Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady not only on her excellent chairing of our Committee and this report, but on securing a slot in the Chamber to tell people about some of the report’s recommendations. Her background as the former Chair of the Public Accounts Committee

gives huge credibility to the points she is making about the possibility that this new and temporary body will not be able to make its mark in the way the Government hoped. One of the areas where my constituency has benefited most in value for money from public spending is flood defences. With her long experience, does she agree that protecting our communities from the impact of climate change is one of the best uses of public money?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** The hon. Lady, the former Chair of the Treasury Committee—she still serves on the Committee—highlights a pertinent point. The chair of the Office for Value for Money said that it is not just about cash costs and that sometimes it might want to look at programmes that will save costs in the long run. However, that was still ill-defined, and we need to hear more detail, because that is the holy grail, really. If we can spend to save, that benefits our taxpayers in the long run in cash and, in the case of flooding in particular, it prevents something that is catastrophic for many communities.

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

**Richard Fuller** (North Bedfordshire) (Con): I join others in thanking the hon. Lady and her Committee for producing this report. Given the increasing pressures on public expenditure since the Budget, the report is timely. The picture it paints is that the Office for Value for Money’s remit is vague, its personnel are limited, time is tight and other established groups are already in place, and there is therefore concern that its efforts may dissipate. It is clear that it cannot do everything. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury is here, and I understand that the chair of the Office for Value for Money was clear that there are a few areas he will be looking at. Does the Chair of the Committee agree that it would be of value for those areas of investigation to be made clear and public, so that we can more clearly monitor where their impact could be felt?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** The hon. Gentleman is saying what we said in the report. As a cross-party Select Committee of the House, we said that we need more detail about what will come. The chair of the Office for Value for Money was in front of us before Christmas, and we recognised that, given the body had only been established in October, he might not have all the answers, but we need those with dispatch, if this body is to be disbanded in October and is to contribute meaningfully to this spending review, although we recognise that would be challenging within the timeframe. If he is to lay down markers for genuine value for money and better spending by Government in the long term, we need precision. We have asked the Treasury for that, and hopefully it will respond to us in quick time—it has to respond to us, whether it wants to or not—with answers. We also need to evaluate the effectiveness in terms of whether, when the Office for Value for Money comes up with its studies and things, they will have to be taken on by the Treasury. We want to know the mechanisms for that and how the Treasury will prove to this House and taxpayers that the body has made a big difference.

**John Grady** (Glasgow East) (Lab): Value for money in public spending is important to my constituents, who work hard for their money. In Scotland, under the

[John Grady]

Scottish National party, we have higher rates of income tax for anyone earning more than £29,000. The Government in Edinburgh and the UK Government that we have just finished with have indulged in some shocking wastes of money. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is essential for the Office for Value for Money to set out its suggestions for ways of securing value for money for future reference in both London and Edinburgh?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** My hon. Friend highlights an important point that I have mentioned already. Our constituents give the Government their hard-earned money in the belief and hope that they will spend it wisely. It is important that the Treasury is clear about what it expects to get out of the Office for Value for Money and, as a result of that work, thereby proves to the House, voters and taxpayers that it is getting better value than it would have done had the Office for Value for Money not existed.

**Chris Coghlan** (Dorking and Horley) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on her excellent chairing of our Committee and on this excellent report. Given that the Office for Value for Money has only 20 staff and only 12 in post, whereas the NAO has 1,000, I share her concerns about whether it will be able to deliver value for money. What additional steps would she like to see taken to reassure the Committee that this body can offer value for money?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** It is important that we know what the Treasury is expecting from this body. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, who was at our session, will agree that the chair was straightforward with the Committee about the limitations of a body of this nature, which is time-limited and whose few staff are not very senior. I am not in any way denigrating the staff, who no doubt are working hard, but we need to be clear about what we are getting from the headline of the Office for Value for Money, an organisation that is small and lean, and about what it adds to the work of other bodies. I listed only a few such bodies, not all of those that are in place across Whitehall.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for her skilful and professional chairing of the Select Committee. I think all Committee members were straining to find the substantive additionality of this body; I am not sure that we totally convinced ourselves of what that was. I very much welcome the fact that the Office for Value for Money is a time-limited unit within the Treasury. I also welcome the fact that the Office for Value for Money intends studies in specific high-risk areas of cross-departmental spending.

The role of Chief Secretary to the Treasury is not easy, and I am sure that the incumbent would say that it has been made far worse by all his predecessors. Does the hon. Lady agree that one area that bears scrutiny is the future of the UK Health Security Agency at Porton Down? In September 2015, the then Chancellor suggested that it should move to Harlow. In 2020, additional investment was needed at Porton in a national crisis, and there remains enduring uncertainty over where that investment should lie. That is a classic example of what this body should be capable of doing, which is evaluating where future investment should be in the national interest.

I am sure that the hon. Lady would echo my concern that the lack of specificity around those specific areas of focus creates ambiguity. Would she welcome more clarity on what that focus would be over the last six weeks?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman, who is a fellow member of the Treasury Committee and a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, for his question. We could have a whole debate about Porton Down and the animal health centre in Weybridge, where there was under-investment by his Government and challenges on his side, but we are not here to make party political points.

There are areas of under-investment, but the lack of specificity and the duplication issues are key concerns, as is reflected in our cross-party Treasury Committee report. There is a danger that unless this new body narrows its focus soon, it will not be able to deliver in time to aid the current Chief Secretary to the Treasury in his work of ensuring that Departments deliver on the spending review and come up with the proposals that provide the best value for money for the taxpayer. We need that clarity. The Government should welcome this report, because it gives them an opportunity to seek greater clarity from this body to aid the challenging spending review process.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): It seems that the Chair of the Treasury Committee has come to the firm conclusion that the Office for Value for Money is itself not value for money. In carrying out her investigation of this body, which appears to have been set up only for a very limited period, she must have asked it what its terms of reference are, why it has been set up only for a limited period and what it is intended to achieve. My guess is that the answer has something to do with the ability to search just about anywhere across the spectrum for any project that causes concern. Did she get an answer of that sort? She must surely have got some sort of answer.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman very much, although I should stress that it is not my evaluation but the Committee's. We were unanimous in our concerns and unanimous in our desire to see taxpayers' money spent well. We asked questions of the Office for Value for Money's chair. Our report reflects the areas that he might consider looking at, especially areas in which there is great risk and areas of cross-departmental working.

There has been a move over the years to get more cross-departmental or joint departmental bids into the spending review, but that has not really got traction, because we have a terribly siloed culture in Whitehall. That is a big challenge, and the current Government—of my own party, of course—have the missions, which aim to bring things together. The chair said that he would be looking at some of that, but that is quite a lot to do in the timeframe available: the bids and cross-party working areas have to be identified, those Departments have to co-operate and the office needs the resource to look at where the issues are. With only 20 staff in total—there were only 12 when we had our hearing with the chair, but there are probably more now—that is a stiff ask. It would be helpful for Treasury Ministers to sit down with the Office for Value for Money and push it to come back with the exact areas that it proposes to look at and that will be most useful to the Government to deliver value for money.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for her statement and her answers. Speaking as an Ulster Scot, like many of us in this Chamber, it might be an exaggeration to say that every pound is a prisoner, but it is none the less telling of how thrifty we are. Ever mindful of that, I hope that the hon. Lady is aware of the issue of agency staff in the health service, whose costs are some 15% above those for an ordinary nurse's pay. I have highlighted the matter directly to the Health Department on several occasions in this House. Will the hon. Lady and her Committee take it on board and investigate how permanent nurse jobs could be allocated? If we want value for money, a 15% saving must be worth that effort and that commitment.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** The hon. Gentleman tempts me to stray into the territory of the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown)—this is exactly the territory that his Committee examines. We all know that agency staff cost more, whether that is for schools or for hospitals, and there is an issue with the pipeline of staff. I will stop there, because it is really not a matter for the Treasury Committee, or indeed for the Office for Value for Money: as the office is short-lived, it would not have the opportunity to look at something like that, as we heard from its chair. However, I am sure that the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee will be listening and will take the hon. Gentleman's point on board.

## Global Combat Air Programme

### DEFENCE COMMITTEE

#### *Select Committee statement*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** We now come to the second Select Committee statement, on behalf of the Defence Committee. Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement. They should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair, not the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

6.23 pm

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to present the Defence Committee's third report of the Parliament, which illustrates just how hard the Committee is working on the House's behalf for the people and their Parliament. My sincere gratitude goes to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this salient, significant statement on the global combat air programme.

The UK is a world leader in combat air. We have developed and built some of the most iconic fighter jet aircraft in history, from the Spitfire and the Meteor to the Tornado and the Typhoon. The global combat air programme offers the opportunity to build on that history as we look to the Royal Air Force of the future. GCAP, an international collaboration with Japan and Italy that aims to deliver a next-generation fighter aircraft by 2035, will be one of the UK's most significant defence programmes of the coming years. The new aircraft, known as Tempest, will be crucial to countering the threat posed by our adversaries in an increasingly volatile world.

GCAP promises much: national sovereignty in combat air, strengthened relationships with key allies and a boost to our defence industrial capacity. However, delivering on that promise will not be easy. The Committee's report seeks to make constructive recommendations that we believe will maximise GCAP's chances of meeting its ambitious target on time and on budget.

Before I come to the detail of our findings, I would like to provide some context about our inquiry, which was begun by our predecessor Committee and interrupted by the general election. Given the importance of the topic, we felt that it was incumbent on us to complete that important work and bring our findings to the House. I place on the record the Committee's appreciation of the work undertaken by our predecessors. I also thank the Committee staff, especially Lucy Petrie, who managed the inquiry through to completion, and our specialist adviser Douglas Barrie. I express my gratitude to my fellow Committee members, many of whom are present in the Chamber, who approached the report in the collaborative, cross-party manner for which Select Committees are rightly renowned.

I turn to the report's conclusions. It is no surprise that a programme as ambitious as GCAP will take up a significant share of the defence budget in the coming years. The Ministry of Defence has already spent £2 billion on the programme and has allocated a further £12 billion

[Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi]

over the coming decade. Our report calls for transparency about costs as GCAP progresses so that our Committee and others in the House can hold the Ministry of Defence to account.

The need for robust scrutiny of GCAP is underlined by the difficulties facing previous multilateral defence programmes, which have all too often seen costs spiral and delays pile up. Of particular relevance is the UK's experience on the Eurofighter Typhoon, where the Committee heard of the difficulties caused by a lack of empowerment in the programme's delivery organisations. We make it clear in our report that those fundamental errors cannot be repeated on GCAP.

If GCAP is to succeed, it must not only learn from the mistakes of the past, but anticipate the opportunities and challenges of the future. Our report warns that it will need to be sufficiently flexible to adapt to emerging technologies including artificial intelligence and the development of uncrewed aircraft.

The Committee welcomes the UK's partnership with Japan and Italy. Both our partners have much to offer. Italy and the UK have a shared history in combat air, having worked together on Tornado and Typhoon. For Japan, involvement in GCAP is a significant step both politically and militarily. We applaud Japan's progress in opening up exports for GCAP, which we believe will be critical to its success.

There has been speculation that further partners may join the programme. Our report is clear that the potential benefits of expanding GCAP must be balanced carefully against the risks, and that meeting the 2035 target date must remain paramount. Our report also highlights how, as with all defence programmes, GCAP's success will ultimately come down to its workforce. Recruitment and retention will be a major challenge for a programme of this scale. The defence industry faces fierce competition from other sectors for skilled workers. Our report emphasises the importance of ensuring that the existing Typhoon workforce is transitioned to GCAP, as well as attracting new talent into the sector.

I conclude with a reflection on the Committee's first visit to Scotland last week. At RAF Lossiemouth we were privileged to have the opportunity to meet the Royal Air Force personnel who protect our skies. Our visit was a welcome reminder that, for all the advanced capabilities promised by GCAP, the UK's security ultimately rests in the hands of the brave servicemen and women who put their lives on the line to defend us. On behalf of the Committee, I pay tribute to their dedication and professionalism. They have our sincere gratitude. I commend the report to the House.

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

**James Cartledge** (South Suffolk) (Con): I thank the Chair for his excellent report and his vigorous statement, reminding the House about the great history of the UK in combat air. The Opposition strongly support GCAP because we want that great tradition to continue well into the future. However, GCAP is not just about the Tempest platform. It is meant to be a system of systems offering technological advances to the RAF in areas such as AI and autonomy. Given how important that is

and how the Committee's report focuses on transparency, does he agree that we need financial transparency to ensure adequate funding both for the platform that we call Tempest and for those associated technologies, because they could bring enhancements to the lethality of the RAF well before 2035?

**Mr Dhesi:** I welcome the words of the shadow Defence Secretary, and I thank his shadow minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), for all his work as part of the Defence Committee in the previous Parliament. The shadow Defence Secretary is right that the Ministry of Defence must balance funding pressures in the near and long term, but transparency from the Government about the cost of GCAP is crucial, because Parliament and the public rightly expect value for money, as the Chair of the Treasury Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), so eloquently highlighted.

**Derek Twigg** (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on an excellent statement. He will know that the Committee, of which I was part in the previous Parliament, was able to visit Japan and Italy, where we saw for ourselves the tremendous enthusiasm for the project and how they wanted to work very closely with us. At the end of the statement, my hon. Friend rightly touched on the importance of the workforce, but this project is also crucial to the future defence industrial base, is it not?

**Mr Dhesi:** I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the previous Defence Committee and to bring the report to fruition. He is absolutely right. This project is crucial for our partners in Japan and Italy and for our own defence industrial base. If we do not commit wholeheartedly to GCAP, it will be to our detriment as a nation.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Tornado, Typhoon and Tempest has a sort of ring to it. I understand why we are using the term GCAP, but its presentation leaves a lot to be desired. One reason is that it is so much more than just the Tempest airframe—autonomous aircraft will fly in conjunction with it. How confident is the Select Committee Chair that all this can be done in a fast-moving landscape and in just a 10-year programme?

**Mr Dhesi:** I thank the former Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee for his question. I am not well enough versed in acronyms to be able to offer something better than Tempest, Tornado or Typhoon. I see the Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Garston (Maria Eagle), is in her place; perhaps she can think of a better acronym than GCAP. It is incredibly important that the programme is met and that we work with our partners. The Committee has highlighted the need to meet the very ambitious programme by 2035, which will take substantial effort.

**Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's statement. As the shadow Defence Secretary made clear, GCAP is a system of systems, but like every programme, it requires a pipeline training solution. Our report highlights the need for a jet training solution now that production for the Hawk aircraft series has been shuttered, after 1,000 aircraft were produced and exported to 18 countries. That is a

grave mistake as our GCAP partners are looking for a GCAP trainer in the US, and we have nothing to offer them. Our defence and aerospace industry cannot survive on elite technology alone. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to look at jet trainers as an essential part of the training system offered as part of GCAP for its pilots, our industry and economic growth?

**Mr Dhesi:** I thank my hon. Friend for his work on the Committee. He has certainly hit the ground running. I fully agree with his views on training. The Committee's report found that training for the Hawk aircraft has been an absolute blunder and a huge missed opportunity. We must ensure that we do not miss such opportunities in future, as doing so would be to our national detriment.

**Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Chair and the Committee for their industry and for this excellent report. He highlighted the size of the GCAP programme and the need for such programmes to show greater flexibility. Does he intend for the Committee to look during this Parliament at the agile procurement of the sort that we are seeing in Ukraine, and to make recommendations to the Government on that?

**Mr Dhesi:** Yes, we have already been looking into that, and the Committee has held evidence sessions on Ukraine. Many of us are impressed by the agility being displayed in Ukraine. We hope that many of those lessons will be learned by the UK Government.

**Will Stone** (Swindon North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement. There has been some suggestion that Saudi Arabia and other global partners might want to join the programme. What does the Committee think of that?

**Mr Dhesi:** The existing partnership with Japan and Italy is a strong one, but we must recognise that further partners could benefit the programme. Our report warns that including any additional partners will require careful consideration, and it must not jeopardise the 2035 target date, which is paramount.

**Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, with our Italian and Japanese partners committing to multi-year funding plans for GCAP to give confidence to industry, the UK should show a similar commitment?

**Mr Dhesi:** I thank the hon. Member for his excellent question and for his hard work on the Committee—long may it continue. I wholeheartedly agree, and I hope that Ministers are listening intently, because multi-year funding settlements can offer us that extra stability to provide a lot more in a shorter space of time.

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend and the whole Committee on a fantastic report. Could he expand a little on the export potential of Tempest and how he thinks the Government might be able to secure that? Secondly, is there an opportunity, through informal collaboration with the other consortia pursuing sixth-generation fighters, for general lessons to be learned between the three programmes, all of which involve our allies?

**Mr Dhesi:** We should always be open to collaboration. I hope that the Ministry of Defence is looking into that. On my hon. Friend's first question, I highlighted exports in my statement and I commended Japan. The real potential for us is not merely to deliver on these next generation jets but to export, because they contribute so much to the Exchequer for the provision of public services in our country.

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the Chair of the Defence Committee for his statement. I declare an interest as a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. In March 2024 the RAF published its autonomous collaborative platform strategy. Is the Chair content with the assurances that there is sufficient flexibility built into GCAP to allow it to operate alongside a range of uncrewed solutions?

**Mr Dhesi:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Committee has looked at autonomous aircraft. We hope we will be able to realise the full benefits, although only time will tell just how much of a benefit we realise.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I commend the Chair and the Defence Committee for turning their scrutinising eye to the global combat air programme. The Chair talked about the benefits and risks of new partners, and explained that we need to weigh the benefits against the risks. In previous multilateral fighter jet programmes, there has been an overestimation of just how much of the product could be exported. Last November, Reuters said that Saudi Arabia could be a potential fourth partner on the programme. Could the Chair expand on some of the benefits and risks of adding Saudi Arabia to the programme, as it relates to exports?

**Mr Dhesi:** The hon. Gentleman is a member of the Intelligence and Security Committee, and indeed a former defence spokesman for the Liberal Democrats. Having extra partners on board can be very beneficial, as it can share the cost burden and enhance our export possibilities. However, as the Committee rightly noted, having additional partners will require careful consideration. Under no circumstances should we allow that to jeopardise the 2035 target date, because that could have serious cost implications for the Exchequer.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair of the Defence Committee for his statement today. In the statement, he referred to the demand for skilled workers. On Friday, I had the opportunity to meet Unite and GMB in relation to the airspace sector in Northern Ireland, where the Chair will be aware a skilled workforce already exists. What discussions are being held with this sector in Northern Ireland to transfer the global combat air programme skills through both smaller and larger operations and contracts?

**Mr Dhesi:** As always, the hon. Gentleman asks an excellent question. Having a robust defence industrial base is vital, as is having a skilled workforce. As I mentioned, our report calls for a holistic approach to recruitment and retention. The Committee has had various meetings with union representatives, and we feel it is very important to retain our existing Typhoon workforce, wherever that may be in the UK. I am sure my right hon. Friend the Minister will have heard the hon. Gentleman's comments about Northern Ireland.

## Points of Order

6.43 pm

**Esther McVey** (Tatton) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will recall that on Thursday afternoon I led a Backbench Business debate on the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, during which lots of critical comments were made about the MHRA. I specifically made reference to the minutes taken from meetings of the Commission on Human Medicines for the vaccine benefit risk expert working group. On Saturday, following the debate, the MHRA removed the minutes from its website. I should be grateful for your guidance and advice as to what can be done to ensure that those minutes are put back on the website immediately, and without alteration. Surely public bodies should not be using debates in this Chamber as an excuse to remove information that is in the public interest.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani)**: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving me advance notice of her point of order. She will appreciate that that is not a matter for the Chair, but she has put a point on the record, and those on the Front Bench will have heard it.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 17 January the world lost possibly Scotland's greatest ever footballer: Denis Law, who was born in 1940 in Printfield, in my constituency. The youngest of seven children, he did not own a pair of shoes until he was 12 years old—he went barefoot. He played for Huddersfield and Manchester City, but he was known for his time at Manchester

United, where he was known as The Lawman and The King. The only Scottish player to have ever won the Ballon d'Or, Denis Law scored in our 1967 victory over England, crowning Scotland the unofficial champions of the world. In more recent years, he created the Denis Law Legacy Trust, which has done an amazing amount for sport in Aberdeen. I wonder whether the House and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, would join me in sending condolences to Denis Law's family and friends on his sad passing.

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. That is not a matter for the Chair, but she has most definitely put her remarks on the record.

**Robin Swann**: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Today the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland took the decision not to deploy the Stormont brake, despite it being supported by every Unionist Member in the Northern Ireland Assembly. This Chamber is the only place where the Secretary of State can be challenged and directly questioned by elected representatives. However, rather than making a statement to this House, he decided to give it to the media. Can you advise me on the options available to get the Secretary of State to make a statement on his decision in this place, where he can be questioned?

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. I have had no indication that the Secretary of State intends to come to the House to make a statement, but I am sure that the Table Office will be able to advise the hon. Gentleman on how to pursue the matter further.

## Backbench Business

### Obesity: Food and Diet

6.46 pm

**Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of food and diet on obesity.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating parliamentary time to this crucial issue. We were actually going to have this debate before Christmas, but we decided that before Christmas was not a good time to discuss obesity; we were then going to have it last week, but it was postponed. I am really grateful to colleagues across the House for supporting the debate.

Our country has an obesity crisis that is threatening the health and wellbeing of the whole nation. It is a cross-party issue: since 1990, rates of obesity have doubled. Two thirds of all adults in the UK are carrying excess weight, and a quarter of adults are classified as obese. The figures are even more worrying in children: 10% of children aged four, when they enter school, are obese; that figure rises to 22%—nearly one in four—in year 6. One problem with obesity is that, as many of us know, once someone becomes overweight, it is difficult to shift. That is why the most important age group to concentrate on is young people.

Obesity is now the single most important modifiable risk factor for the prevention of disease, and I will briefly go through its effects—as a doctor, I cannot resist. Around 4 million people in this country have type 2 diabetes, which is five times more likely in obesity. Type 2 diabetes almost doubles a person's mortality rate, with 22,000 people with diabetes dying early every year. Ischaemic heart disease, the leading cause of death in the UK, is much more common in obesity, as is hypertension and osteoarthritis, which causes joint pain and reduced mobility. Something that a lot of people do not know is that 13 cancers are directly attributable to obesity—it is actually also the second commonest cause of cancer.

As a GP, there are other things I see quite regularly, such as reflux, varicose veins, infertility and even thrombosis, all of which diminish quality of life. The commonest cause of liver disease is now obesity. I will not go into the cost too much but, as we can imagine, obesity costs the country an absolute fortune: on average, four extra sick days a year; and, taking into account the cost to the NHS and so on, an estimated £98 billion a year, or 4% of GDP. The cost to the NHS is £19 billion a year.

What is the cause of obesity? From the evidence, it is clear that the main cause of obesity is diet—it is what we eat. The food system in this country is fundamentally broken. I welcomed the statement from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Streatham and Croydon North (Steve Reed) about sustainable food production: nutritious foods grown while restoring nature, and farms with good food production at its core, rewarded properly. There is a complicated relationship in food production, whereby farms mostly exist on Government subsidy with very small profit margins and then the supermarkets make profits out of what they sell. We need to look into that complicated relationship.

One problem is that unhealthy and ultra-processed foods—UPFs—that are high in fats, salt and sugar are often the easiest, cheapest and most convenient. Crucially, they make the most profit for the food industry. The other problem with these types of food is that they are addictive—salty, fatty foods are addictive. Another problem, revealed by the Food Foundation, is that healthy foods, calorie for calorie, are twice as expensive as less healthy foods. So there are a lot of issues there to unpick.

Inequalities and deprivation are very, very strong causes of obesity, with less well-off people being twice as likely to be overweight. Therefore, one strategy has to be to increase the living wage, reduce child poverty, improve health and social services, and invest in education—all of which the Government are doing.

On pregnancy, obesity actually begins in the womb—it does not even begin when we are born. In one fascinating experiment, one group of pregnant women were fed a lot of carrots and another group did not have any carrots. The children of the women who ate carrots loved carrots, so a memory is made in utero. It is therefore really important that pregnant women have a very healthy diet, as this is a risk factor for obesity in young people. Another is formula feed. Breastfeeding protects against obesity, but formula feeds do not. Follow-on feeds, hungry baby feeds, are just normal milk packed full of calories, so they tend to increase obesity. That is perhaps something we need to discuss, too.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): I am the chair of the eating disorders all-party parliamentary group. To make any progress, we have to understand that eating disorders are highly stigmatised. Many people with obesity also have an eating disorder. To make real progress, is not the first thing to take the stigma away from obesity and get to the people who really want to improve their lives?

**Dr Opher**: I absolutely agree with that. We must treat people in a fair and compassionate way. We must point that out to them, as medical professionals, and help them to get better. I agree with the hon. Lady about stigma.

On obesity strategies, since 1990, we have had 700 separate policies to tackle obesity, yet it has doubled. Clearly, we are doing something wrong. Having looked at the evidence, it is clear that voluntary targets do not work. Voluntary targets for the food industry and relying on individual agency—giving us choice in what we eat—cannot reduce obesity. The food industry, of course, has a vested interest in making money. While education and exercise are really good, there is not much evidence to suggest that they reduce obesity. It is all about food.

There has been a lot of research. Nesta, the Obesity Health Alliance and the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee have done multiple reports on obesity, and it is clear that we can halve it. All we need to do is reduce everyone's calorie intake by 200 calories a day. That is the difference between McDonald's large fries and standard fries—other fries are available—so it is not a massive thing, but we all have to do it. As always with public health, small drops in what we take can have a massive effect on the population.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important, when there is such a strong correlation between child poverty and child obesity,

[Peter Swallow]

that we tackle not only the food systems leading to poor health outcomes, but the price of food? We must see those two challenges in lockstep and work to address both the quality of food and the cost.

**Dr Opher:** Absolutely. One of the main pitfalls we must avoid is that there is no point in making cheap food more expensive. That will make people poorer. We need to be much more creative than that.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for allowing me to intervene. I commend the Government's new policy of free breakfast clubs for all primary school children, but does he agree that we should not miss the opportunity to ensure that that meal is wholesome and nutritious so that all our kids can get off to the best possible start?

**Dr Opher:** Yes, I could not agree more. As I said in the debate on education, we should be careful about the food industry sponsoring school breakfasts. As I pointed out, there is no such thing as a free breakfast. Companies often make unhealthy and addictive food and get young people addicted to it, so we must be cautious.

I wanted a recipe to solve this crisis and what I am suggesting comes from evidence from Nesta and the House of Lords Select Committee. It should be mandatory that all stores report on the food healthiness of their sales. We need a fully independent Food Standards Agency. We should have a ban on advertising junk food, as has already been proposed, and there should be a watershed for children—that is incredibly important. As is planned in Scotland and Wales, there should be a ban on price promotions, particularly for unhealthy foods, ultra-processed foods and takeaways. We also need to put a lot more resource into breastfeeding and diet in pregnancies—remember the carrots—and we must regulate formula feeds.

One measure, which has worked with the drinks industry in reducing sugar, is a reformulation tax on foods that are high in sugar and salt. Supermarkets and food companies would reformulate their foods to avoid the tax, thereby making them healthier. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) mentioned breakfast clubs. There is a lot of evidence that free school meals and breakfast clubs reduce obesity. Where free school meals have been introduced in London, childhood obesity has been reduced by 11%. That is because the food is healthy and a healthy hot meal is really important, rather than high-calorie snacks, which are what a lot of packed lunches consist of. If we cannot have free school meals, because of financial problems, we should have auto-enrolment so that children who should be on free school meals actually get enrolled. That would benefit schools, too.

We must have mandatory front-of-package labelling. I have never met a parent who does not want to buy healthy food for their children. The trouble is that they pick up a packet of cereal and it says, "High in iron and filled with vitamins," and think it must be healthy. Nothing could be further from the truth, so we must have accurate labelling. Healthy school foods should be sourced locally. In Stroud, I have been working closely

with local primary schools to encourage them to eat fresh, locally grown, highly nutritious food. I think the Government's target is to procure at least 50% of food in schools from local sources.

Then there is the famous hospital food. I was recently in hospital with a relative, and I can tell the House that hospital food is not healthy. We had white-bread sandwiches and some crisps—that was our healthy snack. We must introduce healthy foods in hospitals.

Takeaways are another big barrier to healthy eating—there was a massive explosion in their use during the covid pandemic—and we need to include them in any regulation. As I have said, in Scotland and Wales a ban on takeaway price promotions has been proposed. On average, those in deprived areas order more takeaways than those in non-deprived areas. We certainly must not let takeaway outlets open near schools—that is a planning must.

I would also caution against the treatment of the obesity crisis with injections of drugs such as Ozempic, which could well turn out to be dangerous.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): According to today's press, there is clear evidence of that. Apparently, 400 people across the United Kingdom who took Ozempic experienced poor health as a result. It is not for everyone, and the sooner that people know that, the better.

**Dr Opher:** The hon. Gentleman's intervention reminds me of the GP I took over from—an old chap; very wise—who said, "Always be a few years out of date, Simon, because we never know what these new drugs are going to cause." I think that is good advice—not that I am suggesting that doctors are out of date, of course.

Are we proposing the creation of a nanny state? That is the great fear of many people when they are confronted by controls of this kind, but let us look at what happened with the ban on smoking inside pubs. People—particularly in Ireland, but also in England—were saying, "This is crazy; it is never going to work", but it worked fantastically well. We need to be aware of the vested interests of food companies, and we need to take radical steps.

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): I thank my Gloucestershire neighbour for giving way. He mentioned the nanny state. As a Liberal, I believe in freedom, but there are two sides to it: freedom from and freedom to. Should not freedom from some of those representing the big, powerful vested interests in the food companies, who are not interested in our health, be at the centre of this debate?

**Dr Opher:** I entirely agree. I think that this Parliament could do to obesity what the Government who were in power between 1997 and 2010 did to smoking: we could drastically reduce it. For the sake of our children and our older adults, I urge everyone to accept that we need to act now, and we need to act radically.

7.2 pm

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on securing this important debate. There was a lot in his speech with which I agreed, and a lot with which I disagreed. I do not want to explore the subject of childhood obesity, although I think that many of his points about it are quite important; I want to focus on adult obesity.

There are a great many new Members in the Chamber who do not know who I am, so they will not have seen me when I was enormously fat, before I was down to the size I am now. I have struggled with my weight throughout my life, but I have controlled it for several years. Back in 2019 I managed to lose 4 stone through smoking. Cigarettes provided a way for me to diet and keep the weight off. I gave up smoking in May 2022—we do not need to have a debate about smoking and what it does to people—and put on a considerable amount of weight.

There is always a lot of stigma surrounding weight. Everything about weight is stigmatised, whether we are too thin or too fat or dieting—and, by the way, everyone has advice for us when we are dieting. It does not matter what is working; they will say, “What you need to do is this.” I will come on to the weight loss regime that I am on at the moment, but they will say, for instance, “You shouldn’t be giving up drinking, because you will lose your social life.” Well, going to the small Yorkshire village where I live and having several pints over a few hours means having a lot of empty calories—thousands of them—so that is exactly what someone who is trying to lose weight should do; but people always give that advice.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned 400 incidences, but what that statistic did not say about the damage that the jabs, as we call them, can do is that half a million people are having them. We are in danger of getting into the same arguments that some of the nutters who talk about the covid jab have got themselves into—that it is deadly and we are poisoning everyone; and this, that and the other. It is administered to millions of people, and drugs will always have side effects. That is something we must remember. The contraceptive pill, used by millions of people, has side effects. Drugs do have side effects, but that is not a reason to rule them out.

I want to expand on this stigma about the jabs. As I said at the outset, I am focusing today on adult obesity, and as I also said, the hon. Member for Stroud made some important points about childhood obesity and the links with food, but much of what he said was based on the idea that people have three meals a day and they are eating too much. That has not been my experience. Many Members, especially new Members, will learn how exhausting this job becomes. At some points in their career, they will ask themselves, “How do I carry on?” and they will turn to sugar to get them through the rest of the day. I see plenty of Members nodding. They will have chocolate bars, because that is the boost we need and that is where we end up. I have done that.

I have what some might describe as an addictive personality: when I cut something out, I replace it with something else. When I cut out cigarettes, I replaced them with food. It has been a difficult journey. I tried to eat healthily and I tried to do things with my weight, but I reached a point at which I could not do it. In the middle of September, I started taking Wegovy, and since then I have lost over 5 stone. I have gone from a body mass index of 42 to one of 30, although there are still a couple of stone that I want to lose. But—and this is the big “but”—people have to work with it. These are not miracle drugs. The biggest mistake that the press made in this regard was referring to “fat-dissolving drugs”. There is no such thing as a fat-dissolving drug; that is blatant nonsense. For me, this drug takes away

the cravings. It has enabled me to do the intermittent fasting, having a protein-based meal at 1 pm, a banana at 5 pm and a small meal in the evening with a tiny bit of carbohydrate, and I do not eat after 9 pm. That is how I have dropped the weight.

I cut out drinking for the first eight weeks, although I did drink over Christmas, and I cut out sugar for 12 weeks. I want to build on something that the hon. Member for Stroud said about sugar being a drug. Oh boy, yes, it is a drug. I felt horrific for the first three weeks of cutting out sugar. Having had a little bit of sugar over Christmas, I thought, “It is Christmas; you have to manage the psychology of this.” Well, the first time I had one mince pie, boy, did I know about it! I had to have some grapes later to try to bring about the slow sugar release. There is no doubt that high sugar and salt levels are addictive, but I have a personality that made me do that.

A very interesting point was made on Radio 4 last week. Emma Barnett was interviewing someone about this drug—I missed who it was. She said, “But isn’t there the question of morality when people use drugs to reduce their weight?” This is where I think there is a fundamental misunderstanding of obesity in adults and the issue of weight. What is now emerging is a link, a thread that runs through several aspects of someone’s health, not least related to fatigue, mental health or personality, and what is being discovered is that the drugs have a positive effect in many of those areas.

We need to remove the stigma from talking about being on drugs such as Ozempic, Wegovy and Mounjaro. They are certainly helping me, and I know of many friends and many colleagues in the House who are using them, because they do take away that craving. However, it still comes down to willpower. I stand before Members today, and I feel horrific. I have consumed less than 600 calories so far today and it is now 7.10 pm. I do not feel great, but it is working. I am engaged in a process in which I am trying to lose the weight in the first six months, and in the next six months I will go back to the normal number of calories, do the exercise and build up my fitness. This is a programme and a regime, and it is working for me.

However, I must make the point that if people are not willing to work with these drugs, they will not have the effect. There must be a “brake” in their promotion, because people who think they can just inject themselves at home and lose weight are wrong. It is so easy to cheat. Why do I not feel too great at the moment? There are not enough calories in me. What would give me a boost straight away? Some chocolate, or anything like that. When I cut out sugar, I cut out crisps, cakes, biscuits and various other things, including alcohol for a while. I am not going teetotal for the rest of my life, and I am not cutting out sugar for the rest of my life. People have to find a balance, but it is easy to cheat and they have to want to lose weight.

There is no correlation here, but I think there is an interesting piece of work to be done—I will explain why I am saying this in a moment—on the fact that there has been a huge reduction in smoking in the 21st century and a big rise in obesity. I certainly used cigarettes to help keep my weight down, and I know that many other people do too. If someone feels hungry, they can have a cigarette. I am delighted that I gave up smoking; it took me most of my life to do so. I smoked for most of my

[*Sir Alec Shelbrooke*]

adult life, and I have drunk a lot for most of my adult life. I am 49 years old, and I was in my twenties in the 1990s. There was a culture in the '90s that carried on through.

Why did we push forward with getting people off smoking? We did it because of the absolutely obvious and well-proven health consequences of smoking, such as thrombosis, heart attacks and high blood pressure. Since I have lost 5 stone, my blood pressure has come down by 30 millibars; it is now textbook blood pressure. The hon. Member for Stroud is absolutely right. I had pain in my joints and feet, and I would sweat, but I would not give in to it. When my feet hurt, I would not give in to it, because I thought, "If I give in to it, I'm just going to put on even more weight." I would not stop, because I have always been fairly active and have kept going.

I make these points because I recently heard a report that if weight-loss jabs were put out on NHS prescription, it would bankrupt the NHS. I think that is absolute nonsense, because we know just how preventive this sort of action is. That is why we got people to give up smoking. We made a lot of tax from the sale of cigarettes, but it cost the NHS billions of pounds. We know that a lot of the conditions that cigarettes cause are equally caused by obesity, along with many other things. Again, the use of weight-loss jabs could prevent the NHS from spending much more money later on diabetes care, orthopaedic care and mental health care. We know that people find being inactive depressing, quite frankly, and that their mental health takes a decline when they become inactive.

We have to separate the issues of childhood obesity and adult obesity, which are two very different things. For those of us who end up starved of sleep, and those who end up never knowing when they will have a proper meal or where they will get it from, it is easy to fall into the traps. I have often found that people who have never had a problem with their weight are full of all the answers for those who do struggle with their weight, who may well tell others what they are doing and then be told, "No, what you want to be doing is this." It is nonsense.

The use of weight-loss jabs offers the NHS a real advantage, but we have to reduce the stigma and it is right that we ask whether it is moral to use drugs to reduce people's weight. A lot of people do not have a choice about their weight, and they are now discovering that a small dose of hormonal drugs helps them to control their desire to eat. The long-term effects of obesity on the country's health, and on the pressure on the NHS, will be reduced. When I become 7 stone lighter than I was back in September, there is no doubt that my health situation will have a far better outlook than it did, and that is the conversation we should be having when it comes to adults.

There has been enough commenting on whether somebody is stick thin or really fat, and enough advice about what people should do to lose weight. We now have some answers that will actually make a difference, and we have to say, "These are the right things to do," as we do with so many other drugs that help people get through their lives. We do not comment on people using

nicotine patches or nicotine gum, yet we do talk about people who are trying to do things to help them lose weight.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. As Members can see from the annunciator, the debate on financial education has been postponed, so the current debate can go on until 10 pm.

7.14 pm

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this debate.

Some 21.7% of five-year-old children starting school in Bolton are classified as overweight or obese, and the figure rises to 37.8% by the time they leave primary school. Across the country, children in the poorest areas are twice as likely to be living with obesity as those in the richest areas. When we walk around our constituencies, we can see why. We all know that the poorest parts of the areas we represent are invariably overwhelmed with fast food outlets selling cheap junk food with minimal nutritional value. They are plastered with adverts for food that harms people's health. They are often devoid of safe green spaces for exercise and of routes to travel safely to work. That is the impact of the places where people live.

When we add the price and convenience of unhealthy food and the relentless and predatory marketing that pressures people into eating more junk food, we can see why the UK now has the third highest obesity rate in Europe. The burden of this preventable illness is falling on our poorest citizens. It cannot continue. As the Minister will be aware, it is in the poorest communities that we see the worst cases of heart attacks, strokes, type 2 diabetes, fatty liver disease and other preventable diseases.

There will always be those who claim that people just need to make better choices. I would ask them, "Are our poorest citizens making choices that are twice as bad? Are they less informed? Do they care less about their children's health?" Of course not. They face structural barriers that richer people do not. We must break down the barriers. Many of the interventions recommended in the House of Lords report could make a real difference, including improving baby food, increasing access to Healthy Start vouchers and building on the success of the soft drinks industry levy. All those interventions are worth making, but I will talk specifically about marketing.

It is very welcome that the Government have committed to deliver regulations on TV and online advertising in October this year and to end the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children. I note that the latter policy was one of the most popular ideas in our manifesto, because people are worried about what their children are eating and drinking and they want the Government to do something about it. Both policies should have come into effect under the last Government, but unfortunately they did not. I urge Ministers not to make the mistake of listening to the same lobbying that took place last time and prevented the regulations from coming in. The 2018 regulations on TV and online advertising were modest and will not come into effect until the end of

this year. That is not good enough. We must go further and faster to deliver the changes that we need to really turn the tide.

The House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee recommended going further and ending the advertising of foods high in fat, salt and sugar, on all formats, by the end of this Parliament. There is a clear blueprint for this. Tobacco advertising on TV was ended in the mid-1990s, but the Blair Government realised that more action was needed and introduced the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion Act 2002. That legislation could almost be copied verbatim to protect children from predatory advertising or products that harm their health.

A particular focus should be on outdoor advertising. Four out of five billboard adverts in this country are in the poorest areas, and they are overwhelmingly for unhealthy products. It is overtly preying on our citizens, and we have the power to stop it. Eleven metro Mayors, including my own Mayor in Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, have stepped up to end such adverts on the outdoor spaces that they control, but they can only do so much. We need the Government to extend the regulations to cover privately held outdoor advertising, to ensure that children in my constituency and across the country are protected from these adverts.

Obesity and poor diet constitute the leading preventable health crisis of our time, one that is driving horrific and preventable harms to people's health and is driving inequalities in health outcomes. Our poorest citizens are paying the price for these harmful foods with their health. The House of Lords inquiry echoes the recommendations of many other experts, including the Henry Dimbleby national food strategy, multiple leading think-tanks, such as the Health Foundation and the Institute for Public Policy Research, and the 60 leading health charities and medical royal colleges represented by the Obesity Health Alliance. All the experts agree on the action that needs to be taken. The Minister has a blueprint for what needs to be done. I implore him to implement it.

7.20 pm

**Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on securing this debate. I thank him for raising interesting aspects of which I was not aware, such as the 13 cancers. I also thank the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) for sharing his personal journey with us in this Chamber. It was a worthwhile contribution to this debate.

In 2023, nearly 32% of children in year 6 in West Berkshire were classified as overweight, an increase of 3% on the year before. This is not an isolated trend: obesity rates among children and adults are rising across the country. The doubling of obesity rates in the UK over the past 30 years has been driven by multiple factors, of which changes in diet are one of the most significant.

In that time, the UK's food environment has also undergone a dramatic shift. Today, 25% of all food outlets are fast food establishments offering meals that are higher in sugar and fat but more affordable than healthy alternatives. Their affordability makes them increasingly attractive, particularly to those who are under financial pressure. With the rising cost of living, especially with energy bills, many households are left with less disposable income, and food budgets are one of the first areas in which people try to cut costs. Over

the past three years, the price of healthy food has increased by £1.76 per 1,000 kilocalories, compared with just 76p for less healthy options.

The impact of these changing diets is having severe consequences on people's health and is placing immense pressure on the NHS. Obesity increases the risk of developing various diseases, including certain cancers such as colon cancer. It raises by more than two and a half times the likelihood of high blood pressure, which greatly increases the risk of heart disease. According to Frontier Economics, obesity costs the NHS £35 billion every year. That is simply unacceptable. The UK should be among the healthiest countries in the world. We have a rich tradition of grassroots sports, high-quality food production and world-leading medical research, yet our statistics tell a different story.

The UK currently has the third highest rate of overweight or obese individuals in Europe. The Government must take decisive action to address this growing crisis. The Liberal Democrats have called for a reversal of the Conservatives' cuts to the public health grants that enable local authorities to deliver the essential preventive services and community programmes that combat obesity and promote healthier diets. We also urge the Government to expand the national food strategy, not only to address food security, but to tackle rising food prices, end food poverty and improve public health and nutrition.

It is vital that we halt this alarming trend of rising obesity. People deserve the opportunity to live healthier, longer lives. Reducing obesity will also have a transformative impact on the NHS, easing the immense pressure that it is facing. I implore the Government to take bold action and urgent steps to ensure that healthier food options are more accessible and to foster a culture of healthy activity across our nation.

7.24 pm

**Ben Coleman** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on securing this hugely important debate.

When I was writing my maiden speech back in July, I did some research into my predecessors, as one does. It was fascinating to see that it had been nearly 120 years since the voters of Chelsea elected a non-Conservative MP. He was Mr Emslie John Horniman, lately of the Horniman museum. His father, Frederick Horniman, was an MP under Queen Victoria. I was thinking that Mr Horniman senior would find a lot of similarities between his time as an MP during the Victorian era and the job today. The main building is largely the same, although it was possibly even colder in those days; some of the rules and procedures are the same; and he would probably even find some familiar faces among colleagues in both Houses.

Thankfully, one of the big differences between Mr Horniman senior's time and today would be the food. That is not just because the Victorians would not be enjoying the famous parliamentary jerk chicken, but because when it came to the food that people ate in Victorian times, the story was one of adulteration and contamination. Describing the Victorian history of adulteration and contamination of food, the US professor of history Anthony Wohl says:

"The list of poisonous additives reads like the stock list of some mad and malevolent chemist".

[Ben Coleman]

If we had enjoyed a glass of beer here with Gladstone or Disraeli, we might also have been drinking strychnine and hallucinogens. With wine, we could have imbibed sulphate of copper. The mustard with our lunch would probably have come with added lead chromate. Our Gloucester cheese afterwards might well have owed its rosy hue to red lead. It is no wonder that indigestion cures in Victorian times were so popular.

Thank goodness things are so different today. Thank goodness we have food standards. Thank goodness we do not allow people to eat things that make them so ill—except that we do. Day in, day out, food manufacturers add substances to food that, on the scale at which they are eaten today, quite legally damage people's health. Supermarkets promote them and sell them. As a result, obesity, type 2 diabetes and the many other medical problems to which my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud referred have become huge issues in this day and age.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. When the hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) takes an intervention, he must be seated.

**John Glen:** The hon. Gentleman is making a thought-provoking observation, but does he acknowledge that in times past, the proportion of income that any individual, from whichever class, spent on food was considerably higher than it is today? If we are to get to the heart of the matter, we have to address the wider challenge of our society's expectations of how much money we should spend on food. Does he not agree that we are addicted to cheap food?

**Ben Coleman:** The right hon. Member makes an excellent point that I will come to in a moment.

The additives that cause so much harm today have simpler names: sugar, salt and fats. In moderation, all of those are fine, but the problem is that they are being shoved into our food willy-nilly in an effort to preserve it and—on the right hon. Member's point—to make it cheap, alongside making it more addictive by design. As a result, we have what the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee's report rightly describes as a public health emergency. We now have one of the highest rates of obesity among high-income nations. Only tobacco shortens British lives more than poor diet.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke:** The hon. Gentleman is making some very important points. I would add that adult obesity is not necessarily down to the kinds of food that he has outlined. When people are tired or feeling depressed, just the satiation of eating—even if it is healthy and they are eating more than they should—has the same effect. I used to have cigarettes, which did that, and sometimes people drink to do it, but it could also be done with healthy food. It is about quantities that cannot always be controlled, and there is a bigger link. I totally agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying about these addictive substances, but they are not the only part of the puzzle.

**Ben Coleman:** I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's comments. I was not attempting to put together the whole puzzle, but additives are an extremely important part of the puzzle. We do ourselves a disservice if we pretend that sugar, salt and fats—eaten in the quantities they are today—and the ready food that can be bought so cheaply are not poisonous, and not huge problems that we need to address.

I am not wild about the term “obese” because of the negative, pejorative connotations that can make people feel awful about themselves, as has been said, but it is the best term we have at the moment. Over a fifth of children in this country—22.1%—are obese. The figure is even higher in my constituency, which contains some of the country's richest people, as well as many residents living in poverty. In the London borough of Kensington and Chelsea, 23.4% of reception pupils, aged four to five, are obese. In the borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, 22.4% of reception pupils are classified as obese. This is a problem everywhere, not just in the poorest parts of the country. It is therefore hugely good news that the Government have identified a shift from ill health to prevention as one of the three major objectives of their health mission.

It is even better news that a cross-Government national food strategy is being developed. What would I like to see in that national food strategy? What should be done? I would like us to start by realising that it is time to stop placing excessive emphasis on individual responsibility. That may be hard to swallow for some people, but the Lords report makes it clear that 30 years of policies that rely solely on personal choice, rather than tackling the underlying drivers of unhealthy diets, have failed to shift the dial. Sadly, under successive Governments, these policies have contributed to widening health inequalities.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) noted, the Lords report rightly praised the last Government's sugar tax on soft drinks. Officially called the soft drinks industry levy, it was a significant public health success—people are consuming less sugar. While obesity remains an overall problem, it has fallen to an extent, particularly among girls aged 10 and 11 in the most deprived areas. Fewer children are having to go to hospital to have their decayed teeth pulled out. That brings me to the lack of dentists after 14 years of Conservative Government, but I will not go there now. The sugar tax has saved millions, possibly billions, of pounds in healthcare costs, as well as a lot of misery. It is a pretty good example to follow, so I support the call by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud for the levy to be extended to more food products and for similar action to be taken on salt and fats.

I am glad that the Government are delivering on their manifesto pledge to give children the best and healthiest start in life by banning the targeting of junk food at children. Just as advertising restrictions contributed to a decline in the number of smokers, I hope that restricting the advertising of unhealthy foods will contribute to a decline in childhood obesity. I also agree that labelling food better, to distinguish between healthy and less healthy products, is essential. It already works, as allergy sufferers are benefiting from Natasha's law, which requires food businesses to fully label their ingredients.

However, targeting unhealthy food is not enough. Even unhealthy food is better than no food, for those who cannot afford healthy ingredients, for those who cannot find healthy ingredients or for those who do not know how to cook them. I am not arguing that we should make crap food so expensive that people are forced to go elsewhere to buy even more expensive alternatives. As the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) said, it is of fundamental importance that healthy food should be affordable to everyone and widely available wherever they live. At the moment, it is far from either. It is no good badgering people to eat five pieces of fruit and veg a day if they cannot afford to do so or if it is not available locally—that is just patronising.

**Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I am surprised that no one has mentioned the rise of food banks. Does my hon. Friend share my view that, although well-meaning people give produce to food banks, it is often tinned products or ready meals that people need to cook at home, which may be an inadvertent driver of this issue?

**Ben Coleman:** That is a very good point. The poverty in this country now and the cost of energy is causing people in my constituency to go to food banks and ask for foods that they do not have to cook. We are offering people food that might not always be of the best quality, and food banks tell me that a lot of healthy, fresh fruit and veg goes to waste because people are either worried about the cost of energy or simply do not know how to cook. These are addressable problems; these are things that we can do something about if we want to do so.

I strongly back the House of Lords report's recommendation that the revenue from a salt and sugar reformulation tax should be used to make healthier food cheaper, particularly for those on low incomes. I would like some of the revenue to go to organisations such as Alexandra Rose, a charity operating in my constituency. It makes healthy food affordable and accessible to families on low incomes by handing out vouchers so that pregnant women and the families of children under five can buy fresh fruit and veg at local markets or independent shops.

In the heart of Fulham, 376 families and 587 children have enjoyed £85,200-worth of fresh fruit and veg from our wonderful North End Road market, which has operated since late Victorian times. Alexandra Rose tells me that, six months after starting the project, 64% of children are meeting their five-a-day target, compared with just 7% when it began. As the Government develop their food strategy, I encourage them to consider supporting such charities to extend their work through national action.

Another issue is the accessibility of food, and I do not think this point is addressed enough. Many parts of this country are healthy food deserts. In his annual report, Professor Sir Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, said that

“families in inner-city areas are less likely to have access to healthy, affordable food options”

and as a result they will have shorter and unhealthier lives. We have to ensure that good food is available at an affordable price. I hope the food strategy will look at that, as well as at teaching basic cookery in schools—that is another important point.

Change will take time, but it can be done. It just needs the political will. I hope we will reach a position where, if Mr Horniman could come back to see us, he would be delighted. After all, we must remember that he took immense pride in the tea his family produced; it was one of the very few to be declared free of chemicals and safe to drink in the 1850s. Let us hope we can say the same about our food in the future.

7.37 pm

**Aphra Brandreth** (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this debate on the important subject of the impact of food and diet on obesity. Over the past 30 years, as has been noted, obesity has been the subject of over 700 food-related health policies in England. Yet, while successive Governments have recognised the immense challenge of obesity and have sought to tackle it through various strategies, schemes and mandates, obesity rates have remained excessively high.

Although, over the past five years we have seen adult obesity rates stabilise and the number of children who are overweight or obese fall to the lowest level since 2000, there is so much more work to do to address this issue, which is having an alarming impact on people's health. In the UK today, more than one in 20 cancer cases are linked to excess weight, and obesity is predicted to overtake smoking as the leading preventable cause of cancer in women by 2043. It is estimated that, by 2035, the cost of treating type 2 diabetes will exceed that of treating all cancers today.

Alongside this health crisis comes a phenomenal financial cost. The NHS currently spends £6.5 billion a year on obesity-related illnesses. Indeed, the independent national food strategy cited an even larger figure of £18 billion, with diabetes care alone already accounting for nearly 10% of the NHS budget. We must act now to address this issue. We do not have another 30 years to get this right; nor can we afford another 700 policies.

We cannot just look for easy wins on this subject. Rather, we should look for a meaningful, transformative policy shift and not fall foul of previous mistakes. In the past, approaches by Governments have not always been joined up in understanding the whole food cycle, from supplier to shop shelf. Political and economic decisions have contributed to that. If we are serious about reforming the food system, the Government will have to implement a strategy that engages producers of all sizes, from small businesses to large corporations, across the supply chain, to give consumers a choice when they make their weekly shop.

Although it may seem in some respects that we now have access to more food options and choices than ever before, for many people those choices are often limited by cost. Too often the cost of healthy options is increasing while the cost of ultra-processed foods decreases. In the UK, the majority of our diets are now made up of ultra-processed foods. Growing evidence links UPFs and adverse health outcomes, so it is vital that more research is done to ensure we are making informed policy decisions.

We need to ensure that it is not just the large food manufacturers that are dominating the discussion and leading the market, and that we are creating opportunities and spaces for smaller, innovative food producers to

[Aphra Brandreth]

contribute to the debate and help to provide solutions to some of the challenges we face. Part of the solution means working with our farmers, who already produce some of the freshest, healthiest food to high animal welfare standards of anywhere in the world. The produce of the farmers in my constituency is second to none: Cheshire beef and dairy products are some of the most nutritious, natural and tasty on the market. We need to ensure our farmers and food producers are part of the solution, and that we strive to connect people to where our food comes from.

Just as we need a joined-up approach across the supply chain, we need a joined-up approach across Government. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Health and Social Care can publish a strong food strategy, but it will need involvement from the Treasury to ensure the path from farm to fork or supplier to shelf is supported.

I have talked about choice and the impact of food prices for families who are trying their best to make healthy choices, but alongside cost limitations are the limitations on people's time. My husband and I both work full time and, as a mum, I know from experience that after a long day at work, all too often the easy option is to pick up some food on the way home that is convenient but perhaps not that healthy for us and our family. I know there are thousands of hard-working parents across Chester South and Eddisbury—indeed, the country—who will know what I am talking about.

We as legislators, and supermarkets as the gateway where people buy their food, can take steps to improve choice for consumers, both financially and in relation to convenience, that will help us to become a healthier nation. For instance, supermarkets could have a section with ingredients next to healthy recipes, shortening the time the consumer would need to be in the shop and encouraging them to try new and nutritious meals.

We can and must do more to address this issue. We must connect people with where their food comes from, have a frank conversation about the impacts of ultra-processed foods and deliver research to ensure we have evidence to make meaningful change. We need to support smaller businesses, working with them as they develop innovative ways to produce and market their products, and ensuring they have a voice at the table, alongside the large suppliers and supermarkets. We need to understand the challenges that families face with the costs and time constraints of busy family life, and ensure we are doing all we can to help them navigate a path to healthy, nutritious and tasty food.

In conclusion, I hope the Government will look at delivering a food strategy based on cross-party consultation that will address the food system from supplier to shelf, because the cost of obesity for individuals and for society as a whole is unsustainable and is a health crisis we cannot ignore.

7.44 pm

**Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this much-needed debate. I also thank the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) for sharing his testimony about how he lost 7 stone in such a short time—I tip my turban to him.

I have my own story. I lost 2 stone in two months because of what a doctor told me. Forget the nanny state: he said to me in no uncertain terms, “If you don’t lose weight, you won’t be here in a couple of years’ time.” I went home reeling from that news and did exactly what he told me to do. I lost the weight, had a fantastic body mass index and then I went back for my tests.

However, let me be clear: people cannot undo 20, 30 or 40 years of damage. If we lose somebody, we wish we could have had an extra day to say goodbye, to thank them or just speak to them one more time. Obesity, which leads to so many other diseases, robs people of five, 10 or 15 years of their lives, and means grandchildren are not able to speak to their grandparents. Why? Because those grandparents have passed away. We have to take that on board and counter it.

When I went back for my tests, I asked for an extra test, because I am one of those people who likes to be told—I am quite vain—how fit and healthy I am. I asked for an extra scan, and I got it. To my shock and horror, that extra scan revealed one of my arteries was completely blocked and the other, the left anterior descending artery, affectionately known as the “widow maker”, was 95% blocked, even though I had cycled 85 km the previous day. Very quickly, I went into Barts hospital where I underwent triple heart bypass surgery, and I lived to tell the tale. It was all because of years of decline.

While some conditions cannot be avoided, obesity can. When I say that my BMI was 27, the answer is always that BMI is not something to be relied on, but it is the best scale we have. In Ilford South, where 75% are from the Asian subcontinent, 25 is not the BMI number we should be looking at—it should be 23. I am struggling myself, because my BMI is hovering at 24. Another cultural shift is needed—it is a cultural problem—because when people look at me, having lost 2 stone, they say, “Are you okay? You look unhealthy.”

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke:** I chuckled to myself when the hon. Gentleman said that, because people ask me if something is seriously wrong. He emphasises the point that weight, whether thin or fat, is a stigmatised subject. Even when people are trying to get themselves healthy, they get criticism. We have to expose that and get on top of it.

**Jas Athwal:** I absolutely agree. People have come round to check on me and ask me whether I really am okay or if I have an underlying problem, because I have lost so much weight. The only downside to losing weight is that it is very expensive—I have needed a new wardrobe.

Obesity is the leading preventable cause of death. Imagine the prize of an extra five, 10 or 15 years with loved ones: tackling obesity can give people more time with those they love. Obesity costs the NHS billions of pounds and impacts many livelihoods. In my constituency of Ilford South, obesity rates are 10% higher than in the rest of London. My neighbours and their loved ones are struggling and suffering unnecessarily.

The obesity crisis is threefold. Access to affordable, healthy food has decreased, while the prevalence of processed food and fast-food outlets has increased. In Ilford, the number of fast-food outlets has grown by a staggering 47.1% in just the last 10 years. Nearly a third of children in my constituency are overweight. They are bombarded with adverts everywhere on their way to school. Even worse, youth clubs have dwindled, leaving many young people with fewer warm places to go after school to enjoy themselves, exercise and socialise.

The affordability of healthy food, the accessibility of unhealthy food and reduced support for young people have fostered an environment in which unhealthy habits are growing. People do not even know how to cook, which causes a crisis of obesity, robs children of the best start in life and sets them up for a lifetime of health problems. We need to be bold enough to confront the growing trend, which is why we are here today. To tackle the accessibility of unhealthy food, Redbridge council set out a local plan to ban fast food outlets 400 metres from school gates, but were they banned? They were not. The Mayor of London's plan says the same thing. We need to give planning policies the necessary teeth to stop fast food outlets opening right outside schools, and the adverts that bombard our children on the way to and from school.

To increase the affordability of healthy food, we have to work with charities. In Redbridge, we are working with a food bank to create facilities to store fresh fruit and vegetables. Last Friday, I had the privilege of being shown the food bank's new premises, which we had been working on for the past 18 months. I was shown the cold storage where we will store vegetables. It was mentioned earlier that food banks should be able to store vegetables, because that is the healthy way forward. To give young people a place to go after school, we led investments in local youth centres. We need a holistic approach. We need to look at not just food itself but everything in society.

On a national scale, we have to make changes to protect young people from obesity. The Government must do that by fulfilling our Labour manifesto commitment to ensure that children are no longer exposed to TV adverts for junk food. We have banned paid online junk food adverts, preventing the overexposure of young people to unhealthy, processed and fatty foods, but we can and must do more. As has been mentioned two or three times, we must move away from viewing obesity through the lens of judgment, and confront the ways we have allowed unhealthy choices to be the easiest choices. We must break down the barriers to healthy eating, prevent the manipulation and exploitation of young people, and support everyone to live healthier lives.

7.54 pm

**Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I commend the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on bringing forward this important debate. It is refreshing that Members on both sides of the Chamber are all agreeing, and trying to find a way forward.

Figures show that more than a quarter of children aged four and five in Wales are measured as being overweight, with one in 10 being obese. While those figures are hugely concerning, the factors for obesity, as has been said, are incredibly complex. They include the impact of poverty, behaviours resulting from technological advances, and unhealthy foods, to name just a few. As hon. Members will know, health is a devolved matter in Wales. Obesity is rightly recognised as one of the most significant public health challenges, both in Cardiff and here in Westminster. At the start of this Senedd term, the then Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Eluned Morgan, said:

"I can give you an absolute commitment...I'm absolutely determined that this is an area that we should focus on."

Four or five years on from that commitment, campaigners are raising the alarm. Obesity Alliance Cymru has said that without urgent action to combat rates of

obesity in Wales, our NHS will likely face additional costs of £465 million in Wales by 2050. It is therefore vital that health policy on obesity is receptive to the link between the prevalence of poverty and physical and mental wellbeing. That means resources to promote physical activity and improve health education, and more time for physical education. Plaid Cymru is proud to have secured free school meals for all primary school children in Wales. At the heart of the policy is the belief that each and every child should have access to hot nutritious meals, especially when so many rely on their school lunch as their most substantial meal of the day.

To that end, initiatives are already in place that can achieve the high standard of food produce that we all want for our constituents. Where I live in Llanarthne—it is a small rural village in the middle of nowhere, but it is the heart of Wales—the council-owned Bremenda Isaf farm has been taken over to produce vegetables for the public plate as part of the Bwyd Sir Gâr food partnership. The project proves not only that we can still achieve shorter food supply chains, which are useful for food security and resilience, but that local and Government-led farm to fork initiatives can work successfully both to support local farming and to ensure better quality, tasty food for our children and residents.

The Bremenda Isaf project could be an example to emulate across the whole UK, using public land to produce public food. The UK Government's shared prosperity fund, which is being cut to £900 million in 2025-26 before being scrapped, was influential in making that initiative happen. I reiterate my call for any wider funding reforms to consider the importance of need-based funding, and for all funding allocations for Wales to be decided in Wales.

Research by Nesta, an innovation foundation, argues that we can reduce obesity and improve population health by improving our food environment. That means looking at the price of healthy options, portion sizes, advertising and promotions, and convenience. In other words, a holistic approach is the way forward. As hon. Members have set out, policy ideas have already been developed to put that in motion. New ideas and initiatives have challenges, but for more effective decision making, we desperately need a different mindset. Under-resourcing these initiatives will inevitably mean higher future spending on health. Now is the time to look at our local communities and learn from them.

**Several hon. Members** rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. To ensure that everybody gets in, I am setting a time limit of eight minutes.

7.59 pm

**Will Stone** (Swindon North) (Lab): On that note, I will keep it short. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for bringing forward the debate. I slightly disagree with his suggestion that food is the only answer, because I think fitness plays a part, but I guess that is a slightly different discussion. Prior to becoming an MP, I was a physical training instructor in the Army, and I have worked in the fitness industry for 15 years, so I have seen at first hand the positive effect that good nutrition can have on people's mental and physical health—it is absolutely massive.

[Will Stone]

As the House will know, I am an extremely proud Swindonian and absolutely love Swindon—it is the best place in the world, though some might disagree—but there are some facts and statistics that I am less proud of. One of them is that 36.8% of children in my constituency leave primary school overweight—a shocking statistic. They are being set up for failure later in life, for example by getting conditions such as diabetes. It is something we absolutely have to address. As Members have mentioned, when we dig a little deeper into the statistics, we see that not only are those children overweight, but more often than not they come from deprived areas. That means it is not only a health issue, but an equalities issue. That is something our Government have set out to fix, and it is something we must take seriously.

Once again, I am proud that we are having this debate. It is important that we talk about obesity and food, and I am thankful that the Government have taken forward preventative measures for care in the community first, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on that. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud for bringing the debate forward and hon. Members for taking part in it.

8.1 pm

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I commend the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing the debate and for putting himself out there by calling for a sugar and salt reformulation tax. I will add that it is not just through penalties that we will tackle diets in this country; it is also through incentives. Today I want to talk about some incentives being used in East Devon, where I represent Honiton and Sidmouth.

It was recognised a long time ago that ultra-processed foods were not only linked to obesity, but were contributing to malnutrition and poor dental health. I want to highlight the brilliant work of the charity Project Food, which is dedicated to improving diets, promoting healthier lifestyles and reducing the burden of preventable disease in the community. Project Food is linked slightly to a restaurant called River Cottage. One of the trustees, Stewart Dodd, invited me to see Project Food in October. It operates out of Axminster's community hospital, and that is entirely fitting because the work it does is very much around public health.

Project Food is a shining example of grassroots public health action. Through free cooking demonstrations, hands-on sessions, one-to-one support and online classes, it empowers people to move away from ultra-processed food. Yet it finds it very difficult to keep up with the growing demand for its services in Devon. More families than ever are turning to Project Food for help because of the high cost of nutritious food, contrasted with the relative affordability of foods packed with sugar and palm oil.

Alarmingly, a report by the Food Foundation revealed that low-income households now need to spend up to 50% of their disposable income on food if they are to meet Government recommendations on what is a healthy diet. Over 11% of UK households experience food insecurity and, as we all know, millions are turning to food banks, as well as to ultra-processed foods, just to survive.

While the debate is principally about diet and food, we should think about some of the co-benefits of reducing sugar intake. I will point to dentistry. Fewer than half of the children in Devon saw a dentist last year. Promoting healthy eating habits could reduce the strain not only on the wider NHS and secondary care, but on dentistry. We know that tooth decay is the leading cause of hospital admissions for children aged between five and nine, so this is plainly an area where working on the reformulation of food could help save money on dentistry too.

The hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman) referred earlier to Natasha's law, which was about how allergens are illustrated on food packaging. That was extended through the calorie labelling regulations that came into effect in 2022. Those regulations have helped to prevent obesity by ensuring that when people go into a café or restaurant, they can see what it is they are eating and the calories associated with the meal they might choose.

We should also recognise that this can have a negative effect. I had a constituent come to me to talk about the calorie labelling regulations in 2022 and the effect they had had on her daughter, who suffers from anorexia. The requirement on large businesses to put calorie counts on menus had made it extremely difficult for her to go out to eat with her daughter. Her daughter would take one look at the menu and simply refuse to eat anything, and it led to the family simply not going out to eat at all. One way the Minister might consider building on those calorie labelling regulations is by requiring those same restaurants and cafés to have menus with no calorie counts on them, so that families can dine out without the fear of stressing out somebody who has an eating disorder.

To return to Project Food and how we can better support some of the community assets we have to help tackle obesity and improve diet, we should be thinking about the use of community hospitals. We have spare space in community hospitals at Axminster and Ottery Saint Mary, from where Project Food operates. I suggest that the work being carried out by Project Food would be suitable for social prescribing. It is definitely having a positive effect on the people I saw who are working with that charity. It has done some excellent work, and I suggest that its work could be scaled and implemented across the country. With that spare capacity, we could see hubs for nutrition programmes and other public health measures that support healthier communities, which would be very much in line with what the Government have been talking about in response to the Darzi report. By addressing poor nutrition head-on in the community, we can reduce inequality, improve lives and alleviate the immense pressure on our health service.

8.7 pm

**Ian Byrne** (Liverpool West Derby) (Ind): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on getting this important debate in the House. People sometimes talk about rising levels of obesity as simply a consequence of individual choices; they say the issue is no more complex than the fact that people are choosing not to eat healthily and not to exercise regularly. But if we talk to any expert, academic or parent struggling to put food on the table, they will say that the truth is much more complicated, because rising rates of obesity are deeply tied to social and economic changes.

Over the past 30 years, obesity rates have doubled while people's knowledge of nutrition has not declined. Instead, experts point to the changes in the food environment. Unhealthy food has become much cheaper, easier to access and more convenient, while healthy options have become more expensive, harder to access and less convenient. The facts bear that out. Today, fruit and vegetables cost twice as much per calorie as foods high in fat and sugar. To eat in line with the Government's recommended diet, the most deprived fifth of UK households would need to spend 50% of their disposable income on food, while the richest fifth would need to spend just 11%, according to research from the Food Foundation. It is little wonder, therefore, that the most deprived fifth of households eat more than a third less fruit and vegetables compared with the wealthiest fifth. Although everyone is affected by the food environment, it does not affect everyone equally. It is harder for working-class families to afford healthy and nutritious food—that is beyond doubt.

That link between poverty and obesity is clearly seen among children. Those in the most deprived fifth of the population are more than twice as likely to be living with obesity than those in the richest fifth. Children in Knowsley, which forms part of my constituency, have some of the highest rates of obesity in the country. The fantastic director of public health at Knowsley council, Sarah McNulty, says that that is a poverty and deprivation issue.

It does not have to be this way. Instead of a food system that pumps out unhealthy food while millions struggle to put a meal on the table, we could have a system that guarantees everyone a good, healthy diet—putting an end to the scandal of hunger and food banks. That is the demand of the Right to Food campaign, which I am very proud to lead in Parliament. It seeks first and foremost to end the injustice of food poverty, but also to ensure that food is of high quality and healthy. That means everything from ensuring that high-street planning encourages healthy eating, and building a proper safety net to get people out of food banks, to introducing universal free school meals and opening community kitchens. We know the effects that those policies have in tackling food poverty and obesity. Academic studies show that in the London boroughs that have provided free school meals for all primary school pupils, the prevalence of obesity has been reduced by around 10%.

In Liverpool, co-operatives such as Food for Thought, a non-profit company that produces school meals, are waiting to go on free school meals. Many areas in Liverpool are classed as food deserts, with healthy food in short supply and unaffordable for people who are struggling to get by after the cost of living crisis and 14 years of grinding austerity. Just 24% of adults in my great city of Liverpool eat five portions of fruit and vegetables every day.

In 2019, Fans Supporting Foodbanks—an organisation we set up in 2015—created the market-style mobile food pantry model to tackle the issue of food deserts in Liverpool, which has since fed thousands of families across Liverpool and St Helens in a non-stigmatising manner, with fresh fruit and vegetables an absolutely fundamental part of the offering. I take this opportunity to place on the record my thanks to all the volunteers who have created that unique model and made it such a success; it has made such a difference to lots of communities across Liverpool.

Since 2017, the Rose vouchers for fruit and veg project has supported struggling families in Liverpool to access fruit and veg. Almost £300,000-worth of fresh fruit and veg has been bought with the vouchers, enabling almost 5,000 people to access healthy options and avoid food poverty. Such community-led solutions, which put people before profit, are one way we can help those in our communities who are struggling to access healthy and affordable food. I take this opportunity once again to thank everybody involved in those projects.

Both those fantastic schemes are sticking plasters over a gaping wound. We need systemic change. Implementing a right to food is not the art of the impossible; it is in the Government's gift. Its funding could be underpinned by a high fat, salt and sugar levy on food producers. The remodelling of our food system into one that keeps the population and future generations healthy is a political choice. For the sake of future generations, I hope that the Government make the right choice.

8.13 pm

**Sorcha Eastwood** (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for bringing this matter to the House, and everybody who has spoken so brilliantly. This debate further proves the point that the issue of diet and health is personal to so many people, and it has been incredible to hear that echoed across the House.

Food is essential for life. It is part of who we are, part of our story and, for many in this House and across the UK, part of our cultural heritage. However, so many families across the UK cannot make ends meet; they are literally struggling to put food on the table. I pay tribute to the Resurgam Trust community fridge based in the Laganview and Old Warren estate in Lisburn, and to Dee and Carol, who operate the St Vincent de Paul service at the chapel in Lisburn. I feel almost awful saying that, because people in our society should not be forced to use charity in this day and age. Food banks were not normal whenever I was growing up 30 years ago, and talking about them in this way still makes me feel really queasy.

I want to call out something that for me is an elephant in the room just now. Like all thorny societal issues, it will not be addressed and dealt with in the Health Departments here in England and in Northern Ireland. We have people who work some of the longest hours in Europe. Workers on minimum wage, and often on zero-hours contracts, go home at the end of the day to houses that do not have big kitchens and fancy utensils. They might not know how to use pasta or this, that and the other. And why should we dictate what foods people should eat? It is up to them to choose what to eat. Yes, ideally it should be healthy, but we are now in a situation where we are saying, "Well, if you use your money wisely, you can spend £20 and buy a big job lot of pasta and a bit of pasta sauce." What people eat is up to them; what we should be doing is ensuring that they are paid well and in stable work, and then they can choose the good, nutritious and sustainable foods that they want to eat, rather than having to go to some place to beg for food just to live. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, this is something I feel really passionately about.

At the heart of all this is inequality. What the Resurgam Trust community fridge does well is link it all together. We are dealing with a situation in which some of the biggest issues of the day, including housing and health,

[Sorcha Eastwood]

are all linked. It is because we have taken things for granted. Some of the wealthiest people live in my Lagan Valley constituency—there are houses on the market at £250,000 to £1 million—but on the estates in Lisburn, what people are eating is not healthy and is not good for them. I can also list the associated health problems, which include various comorbidities, obesity, heart disease and cancer.

I really worry about the impact of ultra-processed foods, particularly on young people. We are seeing a stark rise in colorectal cancer in particular. I know that some people are reluctant to make that link, and I am not explicitly making it, but we have fundamentally changed the sorts of food that we eat. I could go and do a supermarket shop today and buy something called noodles, but they are not noodles at all. I do not know what they are made of. I was not very good at science, but I know that margarine is one molecule away from plastic. Is that the sort of stuff that we should be eating? It does not sound good to me to eat plastic. That is the bare reality of it.

We also tell people to eat their five a day. Yes, they should, but the number of pesticides and herbicides in some of our food worries me. Some people might not want to hear that. People think that they are eating healthy food, but we must consider how we process that food. I was shocked to learn about how we classify processed foods, some of which I, a relatively educated person, would have thought were unprocessed, but are not. I cannot remember which hon. Member said that ingredients are marketed as a cereal with certain vitamins, for example, which sounds great, but that actually that is nonsense. We could not put anything more unhealthy on our children's plates.

That goes back to my earlier point: if people are short on time and money, it is because of choices that we have made in this Chamber and in chambers right across Europe and the world. We have made the choice to deprive people and families, whether they are family units, carers or people who look after children. I do not think that that choice is right. We cannot turn around now and decry the obesity epidemic whenever we are not supporting people to live and work well.

I simply ask that we look at the other external factors linked to this. Yes, it is about food, and yes, we should be doing more, but we should not be considering that in isolation. We in this House are tasked with the job of looking after every constituent in the UK. That should be as much about ensuring that they have a roof above their head as it is about ensuring that they have a choice of nutritious and affordable food because we have given them good, stable jobs. That is all I ask. I send that message strongly from my Lagan Valley constituents.

8.19 pm

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): This has been an excellent and wide-ranging debate, and I am so happy to have the opportunity to speak in it. I commend the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), who I have worked with over a number of years, for his excellent speech. It is always really hard to talk about oneself, but he did it

with grace. Listening to his really thoughtful contribution today will have helped a lot of people—it has definitely helped me.

As hon. Members know, I am a huge supporter of school food. I make lots of contributions about it in this place; I believe that it should be universal, for all the reasons that I will go on to discuss. It is not only about stigma, poverty alleviation and all of that, but about the health benefits that all children eating healthy school food would bring, especially in regard to their diet and obesity.

Looking at schools up and down the country, the food that they serve is far too inconsistent. We have seen some brilliant examples across the country—we have all visited schools in our constituencies that serve a variety of salads and nutritious hot meals—but others are serving things like pizzas, burgers or chips far more often than they should be doing under the school food standards. That is damaging the health of a generation.

The report by the House of Lords Food, Diet and Obesity Committee, chaired by the wonderful Baroness Walmsley, discussed the fact that too many secondary schools in particular were serving up food that was not preparing students for the rest of their school day. As Members across the House know, this is where the school food standards should come in. However, a study by Impact on Urban Health shows significant differences between what is mandated by the school food standards, what appears on menus, and what actually ends up on plates. In fact, 60% of secondary schools have been found not to follow the school food standards at all. In other words, the school food standards exist on paper, but not on plates. That is why, across the sector and in this House, we have been calling for proper enforcement of the school food standards. This Government must end the postcode lottery in what children get to eat at lunchtime.

There is no greater priority for this Government than raising the healthiest generation of children ever. This is a matter of health: one in three children are already at risk of future food-related ill health, such as type 2 diabetes or heart disease, by the age of 10. Existing Government initiatives are already going above and beyond to combat that, and providing a free breakfast to every primary school child will ensure that pupils are starting their day nourished and ready to learn, but there is more to be done.

The Department for Education has reported that 11% of families nationally who are entitled to claim free school meals have not applied to receive them. This means that between 240,000 and 470,000 children in England—the figure seems to vary depending on who you talk to, but it is a large number—are missing out on their statutory right to a free school meal. This is due to barriers such as complex applications, language or literacy challenges, stigma and low awareness.

An auto-enrolment plan, as outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) in his private Member's Bill—the Free School Meals (Automatic Registration of Eligible Children) Bill—and by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) in his opening speech, would solve the problem. Many local authorities have already had massive success, but data-sharing challenges or bureaucracy should not prevent children from eating at school, especially when they are entitled to a free school meal.

Because free school meals are a statutory scheme, Government funding should already exist to provide the up to 470,000 missing children with a school lunch, so this should not be seen as a spending commitment. That funding also unlocks vital pupil premium funding. Since 2016, Sheffield city council has unlocked £3.8 million of extra pupil premium funding every single year to support 5,400 children. Small tweaks like auto-enrolment really can have huge impacts on thousands of children's lives.

Another concern that must be addressed is the scarily low eligibility criteria for free school meals. Households must be earning less than £7,400 a year before benefits to be entitled. That leaves out up to 900,000 children who are living in poverty by any measure but are not in receipt of that crucial support. We have heard examples of children pretending to eat from empty lunchboxes, hiding in the playground because they do not want others to know that they do not have any food or money for lunch, or asking their friends for an extra sandwich for their friend who never has any food for lunch. We must bring the eligibility criteria in line with universal credit, which would provide those 900,000 children with a hot, nutritious meal at lunchtime. Surely that is the least we should be doing in one of the richest countries in the world.

In an ideal world, we would follow the example of the London Mayor and extend free school meals to all primary-age children, with the ambition of a universal offer. This would level the playing field and eliminate inequality at lunchtime, while also ensuring that all children eat healthy, nutritious meals, setting them up for a healthier life as adults with lower rates of obesity. As we have heard, that would save up to £35 billion a year. It is a win-win, surely.

These progressive steps, empowered by the new breakfast club programme, should be taken when funding allows. The results would speak for themselves, delivering on our ambitious manifesto commitment for the UK to be raising the healthiest generation of children ever. Surely they deserve no less. They are our future, after all.

8.26 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank everyone for their contributions so far. In particular, I thank the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) for his contribution. It was a very personal story, and when we tell a personal story in this Chamber or anywhere else, it always carries more weight—that is not a pun, by the way. It carries a different focus, and I thank the right hon. Gentleman for sharing that story. We all thank him for sharing it, because it may inspire others outside this Chamber who find his words wise and helpful.

I am happy to speak in this debate. I declare an interest as a type 2 diabetic; my story of diabetes is personal to me, but it is one that many go through. I have experienced the health problems that a fast food diet brings. When I discovered I was a type 2 diabetic back in 2008, I weighed some 17 stone. I was in the Northern Ireland Assembly. We were at the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, and I had been to see my doctor, because I had some pains that men get in certain places and I had some concern over them. Dr Mageean phoned me in Edinburgh and said, “Jim, I’ve good news for you. Do you want the good

news or the bad news?” I said, “Well, Dr Mageean, give me the good news first. That’ll get me on good form.” He said, “The good news is that you’ve got a heart like an ox. The bad news is that you’re a diabetic.”

Why had I become a diabetic? I did not recognise it, because I did not know what diabetes was. I was a diabetic probably a year before the doctor told me that day. I lived on Chinese meals five nights per week and two bottles of Coke. The sugar content was extreme, and I was 17 stone. Doctor Mageean told me, “Jim, it is up to you how you handle this.” His very wise words to me were, “Jim, it is up to you what you do, but if you do not do the right thing, it will progressively get worse.” I went on a diet that day, and I lost an extreme amount of weight. Along with that, I of course had fairly high stress levels.

I was able to make those changes and I lost 4 stone in weight, which kept me stable for a while. Then I went on to the Metformin tablets, the Linagliptin tablets, the Jardiance tablets and all the other ones. In the morning I start with nine tablets and I finish the day with five. Many others will do similar things, because that is how we keep alive and how we manage it. Coffee became a substitute. I drink copious cups a day. I used to drink 12 cups of coffee a day, and I have reduced that to six, mostly in the morning, with five before 11 o’clock. There are probably side effects from drinking too much coffee as well.

I tell all these stories to make the point that the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold made. He said that we have to do it ourselves, and we do. That is how it works, although I understand some people cannot. Over the years, I have helped numerous people with gastric band operations. They have all been successful, and it has helped those people. They had special circumstances, and they were able to lose weight. The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) referred to food banks, and my food bank in Newtownards can give diabetic food to those who have diabetes, and those foods can help to manage diabetes.

I remember my mum telling me when I was a child, “Always eat your carrots, and your eyesight will never go astray.” Well, it did not work for me. It was not an issue for me, because I love carrots and I love vegetables. The carrots did not do me any good, but my mum did perhaps engrain in me the necessity to eat greens—the six a day, or five a day as it was. My lifestyle was unhealthy, which led to lifelong consequences. It also means that I understand how very easy it is for convenience and a lack of time to lead to an unhealthy option, which is why I would like to focus on how we can make healthy meals more accessible.

I am aware that it can be daunting as a parent with young children to try to work out healthy options that children will eat which are also affordable and do not take too long to make. It is clear that more work needs to be done to help young families, particularly to get the skills to cook and to create good eating patterns in families of all incomes. I am really pleased to see the Minister in his place and I look forward to his answers, because he is always constructive in his answers. My son and daughter-in-law are staying with us and they have two children—Freya four and Ezra two and a half—and, as a grandfather, I have noticed that they had their children eating their vegetables from a very early age, which helps get that focus in place at an early stage.

[Jim Shannon]

One of my local residents associations, Scrabo residents association, in conjunction with Ards community network, have used funding to put on classes for families to learn how to cook in a cost-effective and healthy way. Their fun, innovative and informative classes helped with budgeting and planning, and they know they were successful. However, as so often, the Government funding for that process has no longer continued. There is therefore less of an incentive for those volunteer groups in the community network to do that, which is a problem. Can the Minister give any indication of whether he and his Department are prepared to target that area to help families understand that there is a way to save money on healthy food?

The latest data for Northern Ireland shows that 27% of adults and about one in 16 children, or some 6%, are living with obesity, and the development of obesity is strongly linked to deprivation. The hon. Member for Lagan Valley referred to deprivation, and it is so important for people to have a decent wage to buy the right food to look after themselves. Between 2011-12 and 2018-19, one in three or 36% of primary year 1 children living in the most deprived areas were more likely to be overweight or obese compared with those living in the least deprived areas. That represents a 12 percentage points increase since 2012, when the figure was 24%. It is now 36% of primary year 1 children, which is a real problem for us in Northern Ireland, although I am sure those figures are replicated on the mainland. Obesity also increases the risk of developing chronic diseases such as colon cancer, high blood pressure or type 2 diabetes, and it is linked to substantial direct and indirect costs estimated to be in the order of £370 million in Northern Ireland in 2009. What are those costs today?

I look to the Minister to consider the approaches that I have referred to. As he and others know, I always try to be constructive in my comments and in describing what we have done in Northern Ireland. What is available to help communities put on the training, and help people realise that healthy eating is not just for those who can afford to shop at wholefoods and organic groceries, but for all of us, and that it can be easier to cook such food in the daily struggle of feeding our families? Obesity is a ticking time bomb; we need to defuse it with a co-ordinated and joined-up approach, and funding is the foundation of that.

8.35 pm

**Dr Beccy Cooper** (Worthing West) (Lab): I echo earlier comments by thanking all Members who have contributed to this debate. As a new Member, it has been heartening to hear so much agreement across the House and so many colleagues putting their evidence, enthusiasm and opinions into finding a solution to this epidemic.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for introducing this debate. Unlike my hon. Friend, who has a medical degree and has become a GP, I took my medical degree and went into public health. I am a public health consultant and that is why I am here. It has been fantastic to hear everybody in this House talk in such resoundingly positive public health terms. It is past time for us to address this issue.

Many great points have been made and I do not intend to repeat them, but I would like to stress a couple of things, starting with an interesting observation about

the term “obesity”. It carries with it a certain load and stigma, which as a female I very much recognise. I want to put on record that this is not about fat-shaming; this is not about how people look or how society tells us we should look. This is about our health; this is about being well and feeling well and being able to live well and thrive.

I also want to put on record something about body mass index. This is a slightly controversial subject in my area at the moment. It is a useful tool, as people have said, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) mentioned, there are different levels of BMI for different ethnicities, and also it can be a limited metric. The House might be aware of the case of a female Olympic bodybuilder being classed as obese. We need to be careful about BMI and what we are saying to people—children or adults—when we see their BMI. This is about taking health in the round, and looking at what we eat, not what we look like.

There is no debate about the evidence of obesity's cost to our population's health and our health system. We have heard the figures from multiple Members across the House, and £6.5 billion annually to the national health service is no small figure. We are literally eating ourselves into our sick beds, from diabetes to heart attacks, from liver disease to cancer; as we have heard, this is the second most preventable cause, after tobacco, of cancer.

I have spoken before in the House, and will continue to do so, about creating conditions for people to thrive and to make healthy choices. Today, as so many hon. Members have highlighted, we live in an obesogenic environment—an environment that promotes unhealthy eating and does not make it easy to undertake regular exercise. A less familiar term is the opposite of that, and perhaps *Hansard* has never heard it: a leptogenic environment promotes healthy food choices and encourages physical activity. The comments on housing and on fair pay for good work were about a leptogenic environment. We might reflect on our own environment, Madam Deputy Speaker—whether it is an obesogenic or leptogenic environment. I wonder how many of us have managed to have dinner yet this evening, and how we are feeling. That is something for the Modernisation Committee to reflect on.

To achieve a leptogenic environment we need to look at measures that create a functioning food system. As we have heard, we need to work with our farmers and food producers to produce a skilled food sector and a vibrant food economy. For our food system to allow us all to enjoy healthy food—again, we have heard this before—we need to ensure that it is accessible, affordable and attractive. We are visual creatures: what we see really influences us and our choices, and, boy, do the food organisations and the food companies know that.

On accessibility, how easy is it to buy nutritious food? We have heard Members across the House talking about their constituencies, their residents, food deserts and how for some people, when they go into a shop, the choice is not from an array of vegetables, fruits, decent carbohydrates and decent proteins, but from processed, often cheap, quite filling, nutritionally poor food. That is not making healthy food accessible.

On affordability, we have heard several times from different Members that healthy food—this is worth repeating—on average is more than twice as expensive

per calorie as less healthy options. If people feeding their children across the country this week on a budget are faced with two different options, and one is cheaper and will fill their children's stomachs, the odds are that they are likely to take that option, and there is no judgment in that at all. It is on us to make healthy food much more accessible and affordable for people.

On attractiveness, how attractive is healthy food? We have heard this evening about the marketing and branding of ultra-processed, high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt food. It is fantastic that our Labour Government and our Minister for Public Health and Prevention, my hon. Friend the Member for Gorton and Denton (Andrew Gwynne) have taken the step to ban junk food advertisements before the watershed. That is a great step forward, but we need to be mindful of how much investment the major brands of high-fat, high-sugar and high-salt foods put into advertising. In digital advertising alone, that figure was £87.5 million. Food organisations do not put money into things if they do not make profit from them. Profit essentially remains their bottom line, not our waistlines.

These are systemic issues, but we do not need to reinvent the wheel. We need to implement the wide-ranging recommendations of the national food strategy. The last Government missed that opportunity, but as we move forward with this Government, let us look at those recommendations, many of which have been mentioned in the House this evening. They include introducing a sugar and salt reformulation tax and expanding the Healthy Start scheme.

In conclusion, we need to ensure that we in this place are legislating to make good nutrition an easy choice for all and that we are curating a healthy leptogenic environment. In that way, we will ensure that we are enabling healthy choices for all our residents and reducing obesity to a slim, historical footnote as we move forward into a healthier future for everyone.

8.42 pm

**Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this important debate, and I thank all the Members who have contributed so passionately. When we talk about obesity, and in particular childhood obesity, we must not overlook the structural barriers that prevent healthy choices. Several key policies could make a transformative difference, and I will draw attention to some of those tonight, but I will start by saying that every family in the UK in the 21st century should have access to affordable, healthy and nutritious food. The covid-19 pandemic contributed to an increase in household food insecurity and food poverty, widening health inequalities. Recent increases in food costs have become one of the primary contributors to the cost of living crisis. Tackling food insecurity in our communities is a step towards reducing obesity. It requires a restructuring of the whole system that takes into consideration how we produce, source, sell and prepare our food.

Early years nutrition is critical. Financial support schemes need to be expanded and increased in value. The current rates are inadequate, leaving many families unable to provide their children with a nutritious start in life. Expanding free school meals would be a game changer. The lack of a healthy, nutritious diet does not just affect physical health; it affects a child's ability to

learn and thrive. Universal access to free school meals would ensure that every child had at least one nutritious meal a day, reducing health inequalities and supporting educational attainment.

Last year, Stratford-on-Avon district council, on which I am a councillor, passed unanimously my motion to tackle food insecurity in our area. It included looking at how planning policy can help reduce unhealthy diets by, for example, encouraging community food growing, the creation of food co-operatives and limiting the spread of fast-food outlets.

I pay tribute to the Warwickshire food forum partnership, which developed a Warwickshire-wide food strategy along the priorities of access and affordability, food education and sustainable choices. I welcome the "Right to Food" campaign supported by many councils in England that are working towards making access to food a legal right, embedding food justice in their policies and calling on the Government to have the right to food enshrined in law.

Finally, we need to look at how we disincentivise unhealthy food choices that are high in calories and low in nutrients. The soft drinks industry levy has been effective, but we must close some of its loopholes by extending it to high-sugar foods and milk-based drinks. That revenue could be reinvested in public health initiatives, creating a positive cycle of preventing disease. Such measures and policies are not just about tackling obesity but about creating a healthier and fairer society. I urge the Government to make the changes that our communities so desperately need.

8.46 pm

**Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this important and informative debate. I will start with some statistics. Over the last seven years, Southend has seen one of the highest increases in England in the number of children living with obesity, with 22.7% of five-years-olds starting school with a weight classified as overweight or obese. That rises to 33.8% by the time they leave primary school.

The chief medical officer Professor Sir Chris Whitty found in his 2021 annual report that coastal communities were some of the worst affected by rising childhood obesity rates, along with many other preventable health harms. It is not fair that where someone lives can affect their family's and their children's health outcomes.

In Southend, we have seen not only that increase in obesity but the closing of sports facilities. I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) with regard to physical activity and exercise, which is also a vital component in the debate. I recently visited Hamstel infant and junior schools, whose swimming pool has unfortunately been closed down. In that scenario, students who predominantly come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do not have access to local swimming facilities. That was yet another facility to close down, leaving children with less opportunity for physical activities. More widely, in 2021 Swim England reported that almost 2,000 swimming pools could be lost by 2030, which is simply unacceptable. The trend is not limited to swimming: since 2010, nearly 1,000 public football pitches have been lost across the UK.

[Mr Bayo Alaba]

Childhood obesity is a complex issue, and the closure of sports facilities is certainly not the only contributing factor to the increase. Poor diet and the cost of living crisis also play a considerable part. Poor diet is one of the biggest preventable risk factors in ill health contributing to lower life expectancy and earlier onset illness. The cost of living crisis and compounding pressures on families' pay packets mean that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and areas do not have the option of a healthy diet. Healthy foods are twice as expensive calorie for calorie as less healthy foods. That is simply not good enough. We need to improve health outcomes for children in Southend and in Rochford and create the conditions for them to thrive.

As many Members will know, the House of Lords inquiry into food, diet and obesity set recommendations that have been supported by key organisations such as the Obesity Health Alliance. In fact, over the past 30 years we have had 14 strategies to address obesity, containing almost 700 policy recommendations. In that time, obesity has doubled. This poses a major health risk for our country and a catastrophic cost to our NHS and workforce.

The vast majority of recommendations were not implemented under the last Government. The few that were implemented placed the burden on the individual and ignored the necessary structural changes. Our Labour Government have been clear in our mission on health and the NHS: to shift the narrative from ill health to prevention. We are already making changes. The advertising of unhealthy food will be banned across all media before 9 pm from October 2025. We could go one step further and put an end to the advertising of less healthy foods altogether.

Furthermore, we could introduce more stringent labelling and regulations on snacks, so that companies can no longer mislead parents with false taglines such as "one of your five a day" or "source of protein" on foods with huge amounts of sugar. Finally, we could investigate introducing a salt and sugar tax on food manufacturers, building on the success of the soft drinks levy. The Government could use that revenue to make healthier food cheaper, particularly for people living with food insecurity.

Our Labour Government are on a mission to improve living standards. To do that, we need to make changes where the previous Government failed. They include tackling obesity head-on, with better access to sports facilities, better protections around the marketing of unhealthy food and easing the pressure of the cost of living crisis.

8.51 pm

**Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): My constituency faces some of the highest levels of food-related health problems and deprivation in the country. With the second highest density of fast-food outlets in the country and high levels of poverty, many of my constituents lack access to nutritious food.

Obesity is one of the most difficult issues we face. In Blackpool, 72% of adults are overweight or living with obesity. In children of reception age, that figure is 27%, but by year 6 it is a shocking 42%. These are some of the reasons why the House of Lords Food, Diet and

Obesity Committee visited Blackpool last year. Its report "Recipe for Health" highlights Blackpool not only as a critical case study, but for our potential to lead meaningful change. The report demonstrated that Blackpool is a food desert, with many areas lacking access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Instead, fast-food outlets dominate the landscape, offering cheap, high-calorie options that often are the only affordable choice for families on a budget. In fact, Blackpool is among the places where food insecurity is most deeply felt, with rising reliance on food banks and emergency food parcels.

The report stresses that communities such as Blackpool need better access to healthy and affordable food. For Blackpool, that could mean revitalising local food markets, setting up food hubs and creating partnerships between local farmers and residents to bring fresh food directly into our community. That would bypass the high prices and limited options of the supermarkets, offering a more sustainable way to source food locally.

At the same time, the report suggests reforming the food environment in Blackpool and other areas facing similar challenges, where fast-food outlets are prevalent. By limiting the number of unhealthy outlets and supporting the growth of healthier businesses, the town could make it easier for residents to make better food choices. Such small changes could have a big impact on public health.

One of the most important recommendations in the report is for food education to be a priority. In Blackpool, where diet-related illnesses are rampant, providing nutrition education could make a real difference. That could include teaching people how to cook healthier meals on a budget and offering workshops in schools to help children to understand the importance of good nutrition. Late last year, I visited Blackpool Learning Rooms, where this approach is already under way. The council-operated project has kitchens, where I met adult learners on the "Eat well, spend less" course, which runs fun and informative classes teaching the basics of cookery and budgeting.

The report also highlights the importance of local food initiatives. Projects such as community kitchens, urban farms and food co-ops are already taking root in Blackpool with the likes of At The Grange, which Committee members visited. The community centre has an on-site growing project, Grow Blackpool, and a café offering affordable and nutritious food on a housing estate that has no shop selling fresh food. Projects such as At The Grange could be the key to transforming our food system, helping people to access healthy, affordable food and creating stronger and more resilient communities.

The food landscape in Blackpool clearly needs urgent attention, but the town also holds an opportunity to lead the way in transforming our food system. The "Recipe for Health" report paints a picture of a better future, where communities like those in my constituency are healthier, more sustainable and more connected to the food we eat. Local organisations like the Blackpool Food Partnership and Blackpool food bank, alongside Jamie Oliver's Ministry of Food, are already making strides in this direction. By working together, community groups, local authorities, businesses and entrepreneurs can create a more sustainable, equitable food system that puts health at its centre. The key is to invest in these community-led projects and ensure that everyone, no matter their income, has access to healthy, affordable food.

If Blackpool can implement the changes suggested in the Food, Diet and Obesity Committee's report, it could serve as a model for towns across the UK. Local food hubs, healthier eating habits, better education and a shift in the food environment could change our future. It will not happen overnight, and it will not be easy, but the foundations are already there. With the right investment and support from both local and national leadership, Blackpool can become a shining example of how we can build a more sustainable food system and a healthier community.

8.56 pm

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on securing what has been a powerful and impactful debate. It has reflected the personal experiences and relationship that people have with food, which can be complex.

My interest in this subject started as a councillor in West Lothian, when I became acutely aware of the growing financial pressures that have left people really struggling to put food on the table. My experiences with constituents experiencing hardship led me to champion the Co-operative party's "Food Justice" campaign and initiate the set-up of the West Lothian Food Network. The network, which consists of local third sector and community groups, has evolved over the years. Initially set up just days before lockdown, it ended up providing emergency food support to those in financial hardship and experiencing social isolation during the pandemic. Today, the network is a 21-member organisation that addresses inequalities and supports those on low incomes, from rural areas and from disadvantaged groups who are at risk of poor health outcomes because of food insecurity. I put on the record my thanks to all the staff and volunteers from those organisations that have played a part in the network over the years, including West Lothian food bank. I also thank the team at Bo'ness Storehouse, which supports my constituents in that area.

With the increasing obesity gap between the most and least deprived, health inequalities are also on the rise. The reality in Scotland is startling. As we have already heard, two thirds of all adults are overweight, and a third of children start primary school at risk of being overweight. One in six Scots is on a waiting list, and there is no doubt that many will be there due to obesity and diet-related health complaints, with many more on long-term medication for conditions such as high blood pressure, osteoarthritis and type 2 diabetes.

The damage of unhealthy food does not fall evenly across the country. The vast majority of billboards for junk food advertising are targeted towards the most income-deprived communities, and fast-food outlets make up a significantly higher proportion of local food options. Again, that is something I heard time and again as a councillor. Many communities were crying out for fresh fruit and veg shops, but all they saw were more fast-food outlets opening. It has become worryingly common that communities that have the least do not have access to choice when it comes to where they shop. We have heard about food deserts. Limited transportation options further compound the problem. If someone does not drive and they live in an area that is ill-served by bus or train routes, the foods that are more likely to be on offer

to them will be highly processed with less nutritional value, higher in salt, fat and sugar, and often more expensive.

The underlying pressures on time, local infrastructure and earnings impact on the freedom to choose and the ability to lead healthier lives. I am very grateful for organisations such as the Whitburn Community Development Trust and the West Lothian Foodbank, which have community gardens and take the produce from the gardens and put them directly into their pantries to support people to access nutritious, healthy food. But if you live in an area where there is no such group or community garden, and if you are struggling financially to put food on the table and you have no way to make it to a lower-cost supermarket that does have healthier options, can we really say that you have a choice?

Adults on low incomes are more than twice as likely to have diets that are high in sugar, saturated fats and salts, and low in fibre, fruit, vegetables and fish. We know that a weaker diet from a young age is detrimental to long-term development and health. That impact can be seen in our hospitals, where, as we heard, tooth decay is the most common reason for the admission of children. Lack of access to local dentists is an issue I raised at Prime Minister's questions last week. In Scotland, we have the shameful statistic that one in four children are starting school with tooth decay.

The cost is personal and societal. The human cost of obesity can be measured in increasingly impaired mobility, slower recovery from illness and earlier physical decline. Last year, Diabetes UK reported that in Scotland the number of cases of people under 40 living with type 2 diabetes rose by almost a third between 2016 and 2022. In 2023, Frontier Economics estimated that the total economic impact of obesity in the UK is £98 billion, including costs to the NHS and social care, lost productivity, workforce inactivity and welfare payments. Diabetes care alone accounts for nearly 10% of the NHS budget. The scale of the pressure demands urgency in how we respond. The impact on the economy can be measured in lost productivity, but most importantly it reflects a really worrying trend: the shrinking working population, greater social isolation and the rise in the number of people with complex health needs.

Policy often talks of the last mile, the final few yards, to get support over the line and accessible to those who need it most. In my view, that must be the first and most essential mile. There are national changes that we can make and that we have made. I welcome the Government's new restrictions on advertising to children, with the new watershed restriction and online advert ban as a strong first step to reduce exposure. We have to do more to make food accessible, cheaper and more available in communities where they have the least. The uprating of the sugar levy will force businesses to further innovate their products, lower the sugar content and find taste without relying on unhealthy additives. The revenue raised, as we have heard, could be used to address the gap in accessibility to healthier food at community level, particularly in those areas with the greatest challenges.

I look forward to that constructive conversation continuing across the House. Doing nothing is not an option if we are to have a healthy workforce in future, reduce health inequalities facing those with the least, and leave our children a legacy of living longer, healthier and more active lives.

9.4 pm

**Sonia Kumar** (Dudley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this important debate. The growing prevalence of obesity is a public emergency. It is profoundly affecting not only individuals' lives, but the economic and social fabric of our nation.

Let me clearly state that this is not a debate about willpower or individual choice; it is about the systems, environments and inequalities that shape those choices. What does it say about our country when children in areas of deprivation are twice as likely to experience obesity as their peers in wealthier communities, when children in the least well-off families eat significantly fewer fruit and vegetables, or when families with the lowest incomes are more than twice as likely to consume diets that are high in sugar, salt and fat? To me, it says that we are failing those on the lowest incomes. As a physiotherapist, I have worked with families grappling with the challenges of facing childhood obesity. I have seen the emotional toll on children who are bullied or excluded, and the frustration of parents who have no access to affordable, healthy food or safe spaces for their children to play in.

Medical practitioners are also witnessing the impact on people's mental health. Obesity is not merely about calories in and calories out; the medical journal *The Lancet* has rightly described it as a "complex adaptive system". There is a battle to be had against obesity on so many levels. It starts with Government policies on housing and education and behaviour relating to diet and exercise. There are also biological factors at play, including genetics, age and ethnicity.

The further statistics are alarming. In England, two thirds of adults live with obesity or are overweight, and 29% are severely obese. Among children, the situation is equally troubling. The weight of one in five children entering primary school is above a healthy level, and by the time they leave, the figure rises to one in three. This is compounded by societal changes and challenges: the high cost of living and of healthy food; the prevalence of products high in fat, sugar or salt; and environments saturated with fast-food outlets and inadequate green spaces.

The financial costs are staggering. Obesity-related illnesses currently cost the NHS £6.5 billion a year, a figure projected to rise to £9.7 billion by 2050. Across the economy, the broader impact, including loss of productivity, has been estimated to be £98 billion each year.

To address this multifaceted crisis, we must adopt a systematic, whole-society approach. We need key interventions to help us to deal with our obesity public health problem. We must make changes such as expanding the healthy start scheme and increasing the value of payments to reflect rising food costs; perhaps looking again at the advertising ban and considering whether we should go further; incentivising businesses to reformulate products to reduce salt, sugar and fat content; supporting after-school activities hubs to increase physical activity among children; strengthening school food standards to ensure that children have access to nutritional food; creating and maintaining safe, accessible green spaces, thus encouraging outdoor activity, reducing sedentary behaviour and improving mental health; and designing urban environments that prioritise active travel such as walking and cycling through better infrastructure—for instance, cycle lanes and pedestrian zones.

The Government should adopt a comprehensive food strategy with independent oversight from the Food Standards Agency. Targets should be set for reducing the availability of products with high levels of fat, sugar or salt, and increasing the number of healthier food options. Local authorities should be empowered with greater planning and licensing control to limit the proliferation of fast-food outlets and promote healthier eating.

Parliament has a responsibility to lead on this issue. We must move away from the medicalised paradigm that isolates obesity as an individual issue, and focus on the societal structure that underpins it. Policies must address the root causes of inequality, which drive the disproportionate impact of obesity on lower-income families. I call on the Government to enact bold, decisive measures to transform our food system and environment. This is not just about health; it is about fairness, opportunity and creating a future in which no child's potential is limited by the circumstances of where they were born. Let us grab the opportunity to address obesity comprehensively by putting health, equality and wellbeing at the heart of our policies.

9.10 pm

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing this really important debate, and for his thoughtful and incredibly insightful speech on one of the biggest health challenges that our country faces, as many Members have said. After a week's delay, I am glad that we are now able to have this debate, and it has been great to see how much consensus there is across the House on the need to act.

As we set out in our manifesto, and as the consultation on the 10-year plan for the NHS says, we must move towards having a much sharper focus on the prevention of ill health for the sake of the long-term viability of our NHS. As other Members have said, there is a huge crisis, with growing levels of obesity putting the nation's health at risk. In my constituency, nearly 15,000 Dartford residents meet the definition of obese. Such statistics denote immense health inequalities, with those on low incomes far more likely to be obese, as other Members have pointed out.

There are plenty of reasons why we must take action in this area. We spend £6.5 billion annually on treating obesity-related ill health, and around £10 billion a year on diabetes, with the number of type 2 diabetes diagnoses doubling over the last 15 years. Aside from the financial cost, we should surely wish for people to live longer, healthier lives.

This month I am privileged to be spending my Tuesdays and Thursdays on the Public Bill Committee for the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, a landmark piece of legislation that we will go through line by line. Among other measures, it will prevent anyone born after 1 January 2009 from purchasing tobacco. I am very pleased to see in this Chamber a number of colleagues who are also on that journey with me, including the Minister and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson). The arguments that we hear against obesity interventions today are the same ones that we heard about restricting smoking in days gone by: that it is "nanny state", that regulatory approaches

do not work, that the public will not stand for it, and that it makes things more expensive, which impacts on those who can least afford it.

One of the greatest public health legacies of the last Labour Government are their interventions on smoking. Smoking was to the last Labour Government what obesity can be to the current one. Obesity currently places a staggering burden on the NHS and the wider economy, but it will be one of the great legacies of this Government if we can turn things around and make our country healthier. Solutions are urgently needed.

I very much welcome the Government's plans to review the sugar tax and to consider extending it to milk-based drinks. As many Members have said, however, we need to go so much further, including by taxing foods that are high in salt, fat and sugar, as recommended by the House of Lords inquiry. Manufacturers reformulated their products in the face of the soft drinks industry levy, and I see no reason why that cannot happen with a well-designed levy on foods high in fat, salt and sugar.

I very much welcome the Government's commitment to banning advertisements for junk food aimed at children and the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to under-16s, and I look forward to working with Members of different parties to tackle this crisis. In my time in local government, I have seen how supporting less well-off families to replace unhealthy foods in their diet with fresh fruit and vegetables—such as through the programme run by the Alexandra Rose Trust, which others have mentioned tonight—has had a transformative impact on families' physical and mental health. I urge the Government to fund voucher schemes, introduce food ambassadors to improve cooking skills, and encourage food growing as part of the solution.

As we are in Veganuary, I commend the work to increase the level of plant-based food in people's diets. I hasten to add that I am not a vegan myself, although I do aspire to eat more healthily. Veganuary and vegan diets are good for our health and good for the planet. That could be part of the solution, and I urge the Minister and others, particularly those in local government, to consider it too.

9.15 pm

**Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for his persistence in securing this debate. The right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) talked in his captivating speech about the difference between adult obesity and childhood obesity. My Cheshire colleague the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) talked about choice, but of course children do not always have a choice. They are the ones I hope to speak for tonight.

In Mid Cheshire, the levels of children measuring as overweight are worryingly high. The statistics broadly track the England average, but there are some notable significant peaks and troughs, with over 38% of children in year 6 measuring as overweight in six wards out of 12. Children from the most deprived areas of England are twice as likely to be living with obesity as those from the least deprived areas, which demonstrates that persistent inequalities exist in childhood obesity. That tracks with the pattern in my constituency. Worryingly, more than half of children living with obesity go on to be obese adolescents and more than three quarters of obese

adolescents become obese adults. This is certainly reflected in the levels of adult obesity locally and nationally. In my area, over 68% of adults are classed as living with overweight or with obesity, which is more than the England average of 64%.

It is sometimes too easy to reduce the issue to cold statistics. Doing so not only fails to recognise the real consequences of obesity both on individuals and on society, but overlooks its causes. We certainly cannot ignore the impact of food and diet on obesity, particularly in the context of health inequalities and the current cost of living crisis. The food choices we make are heavily influenced by our environment and socioeconomic status.

It is crucial to understand that the availability and accessibility of healthy food options are not the same for everyone. Health inequalities persist in our society, with many individuals and families facing barriers that hinder their ability to make nutritious food choices. These disparities are further exacerbated by the cost of living crisis, in which rising prices of essential goods have forced many people to prioritise affordability over nutritional value. In that environment, unhealthy processed foods often become the most accessible option, leading to a rise in obesity rates among vulnerable communities.

The consequences of obesity are profound, particularly for our children. Studies show that children struggling with obesity are at higher risk of myriad health issues including diabetes, heart disease, asthma and mental health challenges. Beyond the physical ramifications, obesity can limit their life chances. This cycle of disadvantage not only impacts their present but shapes their future, creating a lasting legacy of inequality that follows them into adulthood. The evidence could not be clearer that inequality and obesity are intrinsically linked. The repercussions from both constitute a notable source of morbidity and impaired quality of life, and their complications can have a major bearing on life expectancy.

The toll on individual health is staggering, but it is only part of the story. Beyond individual health, we must consider the wider economic and societal consequences of obesity. The costs associated with treating obesity-related illnesses strain our NHS and divert resources from other essential services. As obesity rates continue to rise, so too does the burden on our healthcare system. The annual £6.5 billion cost of obesity is projected to increase to £9.7 billion by 2050. The total cost to the UK economy, including NHS treatment costs and lost productivity, is estimated to be a staggering £98 billion per year.

We bear a collective responsibility to address the root causes of food and diet on obesity, to tackle not only the individual health implications but the implications to our wider society. To do so, we must advocate policies that promote healthier food environments, ensure equitable access to nutritious food and support families in making healthier choices, regardless of their financial situation. Education and awareness must also play a critical role in this effort. By empowering individuals with knowledge about nutrition and healthy lifestyles, we can help to break the cycle of obesity.

I am proud that this Labour Government are committed to leading on a bold food strategy. Similarly, I welcome the introduction of school breakfast clubs through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and the updates to the national planning policy framework on the siting of hot food takeaways, the promotion of increased access to green spaces and sustainable transport. Both policies

[Andrew Cooper]

will help in the fight to tackle childhood obesity, address systemic health inequalities and promote positive health outcomes. However, given the clear statistical link between poverty, inequality and childhood obesity, we must bear down on child poverty in this Parliament if we are to tackle the issue. I look forward to hearing more from the child poverty taskforce when it reports this year.

Addressing obesity is not just a moral imperative. It is critical to supporting this Government's efforts to ensure the long-term sustainability of the NHS, to break down barriers to opportunity and to increase economic productivity. As we have heard today, the impact of food and diet on obesity is a multifaceted issue that requires our immediate attention. By implementing effective policies and working towards a healthier future, we can create a society in which everyone can thrive, free from the burdens of obesity and its associated health challenges.

9.21 pm

**Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): A bariatric bed is a special big, strong bed used in hospitals for extremely obese people. When I was a medical student, there was no such thing as a bariatric bed—not invented, not needed. But then, hospitals did not have food banks for their staff either. So how have we got our relationship with food into such a mess?

The epidemic of obesity is a public health emergency costing billions. Millions of our citizens are dying early. The Government simply must act. This cannot be left to the market. We did it with smoking, and now we will do it with obesity. We have no choice. We know that at the heart of the matter is high-fat, high-sugar, high-salt, factory-produced food that is often ultra-processed, cheap, convenient, tasty and very profitable for a few very large food businesses. Nor must we forget that it is our poor citizens who are most affected—those who are cash-poor, time-poor and at high risk of a poor diet.

We cannot continue like this. The Government must act to change food habits. This is not the nanny state; this is simply good government. "Smoking kills," it says on cigarette packets. Some food kills, too, so how about "The food in this packet will kill you if it is not part of a healthy, mixed diet"? Obesity is a massive issue for surgeons, increasing morbidity and mortality. Although we can staple stomachs or inject up to 3.5 million people with anti-obesity drugs, we all know that that is not the answer. Let us use the power of Government to legislate: warnings on food packets, breakfast clubs in schools, which we have already introduced, advertising bans, tax incentives, cooking education and an end to the dependence on the cheap, unhealthy food that blights the lives of so many of our citizens. We have no choice.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way during a very interesting speech. Does he agree that the national curriculum review presents the Government with an opportunity to encourage and strengthen the healthy eating component of the relationships, sex and health education curriculum so that citizens and especially young people are empowered to make healthier decisions on eating?

**Peter Prinsley:** My hon. Friend's intervention was not really an intervention, because I had reached the end of what I wished to say. Nevertheless, I thank him sincerely.

9.24 pm

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to close the debate for the Liberal Democrats. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) on securing the debate. All the contributions, including his opening speech, have been excellent and well informed.

I was particularly interested to hear about the existence of good food deserts in Blackpool South and Liverpool West Derby. Even in Shropshire, where we grow some of the most wonderful and nutritious food that can be imagined, we have a higher-than-average obesity rate: 67% of adults are overweight and 32% are medically obese. That is an interesting reflection on the availability of good food and on people's ability to choose healthy options because of the cost of food at the supermarket. In rural areas, housing is more expensive but average wages are lower. If people cannot access public transport, as the hon. Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan) pointed out, they are often forced to shop at expensive local shops and are thereby forced into buying packets of less nutritious food.

We need to deal with obesity. Two thirds of the adult population are overweight. The NHS is spending almost a tenth of its annual budget on diabetes. Obesity has a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of people who deserve better: they are three times more likely to develop colon cancer, two and half times more likely to have high blood pressure, and five times more likely to have type 2 diabetes. The history of tackling those problems is a litany of failure for all three major parties in 30 years of government because, as other hon. Members have mentioned, we have had 700 different policies on the issue over the years, with no impact. It is time for a coherent strategy to tackle the obesity crisis.

It is good to tentatively welcome the Government's new national food strategy and their steps on junk food advertising, which are a positive move. The Liberal Democrats would like to see the Government go further, particularly on the use outdoor advertising in areas where people are particularly vulnerable to seeing it. For example, we want local authorities to be allowed to restrict outdoor advertising near schools.

I am interested in some of the suggestions that have been made about planning and fast food outlets, especially as 35.2% of children aged 10 to 11 are now overweight—a staggering 20% rise since 2015. That coincides with a 16% fall in spending on obesity-related measures in the public health grant during the same period. We welcome the Government's proposed preventive measures. We hope that some of the large sum earmarked for health and the NHS in the recent Budget can be put into public health and prevention measures, because we want to stop people getting unhealthy in the first place rather than dealing with the problem after it occurs.

In Shropshire, one in five children aged four to five are overweight and more than one in 10 are obese. Ironically, almost half are not eating enough fruit and veg, despite the fact that they are grown all around us. The same number are not active enough. To encourage activity, we could introduce a different classification for leisure centres. Hon. Members have mentioned the importance of swimming pools and places to become fit and healthy. I know that the hon. Member for Stroud says that the food element is more important than the activity element; none the less, we should be encouraging

getting fit as part of a healthy lifestyle. Will the Minister consider making leisure centres part of our critical health infrastructure so people can rely on their leisure centre staying open and can have somewhere to go if they cannot exercise in their home or their local area?

Healthy eating helps with other preventable problems, such as tooth decay. My hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) mentioned poor oral health, another avoidable issue that we can deal with. The importance of good oral health in care homes has recently been impressed on me by various members of the dentistry profession, because poor oral health can lead to aspirated pneumonia. That is a partially separate issue from obesity, but unhealthy and sugary snacks are being offered to people in care homes, so I wonder whether we can encourage healthier eating in those settings as well as in our schools and hospitals.

There is no getting away from the fact that obesity is intrinsically linked to inequality and deprivation. Since 2019, the cost of a weekly food shop has risen by almost a third. As I mentioned, rural areas are not excluded. In Shropshire, 14% of households are struggling with food poverty, or as I prefer to call it, poverty. There is a high risk of cost of living vulnerability for children who are in poverty.

Lots of Members spoke about the great work of their local food bank. In Shropshire, an organisation called OsNosh takes food that is due to be thrown away by the supermarkets at the end of the day but is still perfectly good to eat. The next day, it produces fantastic chef-cooked lunches that people can enjoy. If people are able to pay for those lunches, they can do so; if they are not, they do not have to. It is a wonderful way of bringing the community together to eat good food without the stigma of not being able to afford it. However, I think we all agree that reliance on the third sector to solve this problem is not really acceptable in the modern age, so lifting families out of poverty must be a priority for the Government. Our policy is for free school meals for all children in poverty, and a roll-out of free school meals to all primary schools is our ambition when funds allow. I hope that the Government also have the ambition, when funds allow, of lifting the two-child benefit cap, which would lift a quarter of a million children out of poverty.

Holiday activities and food programmes happen across the country, not just locally. In the summer, I visited a HAF programme in Oswestry at which children were offered a healthy meal, a day out of the home—often in a much safer environment than their home—and a good day of activities. The organisation that delivers that in Oswestry, the New Saints Foundation, offers it not just to children whose families cannot afford a nutritious meal at home but to all children, to remove the stigma, and give all the kids a fun day at the HAF programme. Future funding for HAF programmes is not certain, so will the Minister clarify what will happen to them? They are a really good way to ensure that children eat healthily through the holidays, as well as when they are at school and in receipt of free school meals.

The hon. Member for Stroud also mentioned labelling. I am conscious of time, so I will be fairly brief with this little anecdote. Labelling can be really misleading, even to parents who are comfortably off—I would not describe myself as the most well off—and well meaning. It was a long time ago, so I will not mention the brand, but I

resorted to buying an organic brand of food for my child when we were at the puree stage of weaning. He became so addicted to it that it became really difficult to wean him off on to something much more nutritious, filling and healthy, such that I had a sleepless night every night because he was still hungry. One evening, I had a very embarrassing moment in the supermarket, almost having a breakdown because I had bumped into an old friend and the supermarket had sold out of these food pouches, and that was a complete disaster.

I found out later that although the puree was organic and had no added sugar, it was actually really high in sugar. It was essentially just pears, water and some spelt, so it was really sweet and sugary. I had inadvertently given my child something that I had expected to be healthy but was not. Good labelling would have solved that problem; I am sure that it would help many parents whose child has a single brand addiction. It was 15 years ago, and the brand may well have reformulated since then, which is why I will not mention the name, but it is something that we need to be aware of.

The right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) spoke powerfully about his own struggle with his weight, and he mentioned the use of various different types of jab to tackle obesity. I do not think that we should dismiss jabs out of hand. Clearly, they are very helpful for some people, but I really think that the Government's emphasis needs to be on prevention, and on a public health strategy to stop people getting to the point of needing to use those drugs in the first place.

The UK should be one of the healthiest countries in the world. We have a great history of grassroots sports, the highest-quality food production imaginable, and world-leading medical research, but we are becoming sicker, and falling behind similar countries. It is time to act. We welcome the junk food advertising ban and restrictions on high-caffeine energy drinks as a really good first step. We also welcome the commitment to a national food strategy. I put in a plea for our farmers, who work to very low margins. I ask for the strategy to consider the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator, and ensure that our farmers are kept in business to continue to deliver our food. Finally, please consider our calls for prevention, to give children a healthy start in life.

9.34 pm

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I should declare an interest as a children's doctor and a farmer's wife.

We all want to live healthy lives. It gives us a healthy life expectancy, reduces illness burden and gives us more happy years to spend with those whom we love. However, beginning in the second half of the 20th century and continuing today, the developed world has seen an unprecedented rise in obesity levels. The growth of high-calorie processed food and sugary drinks, along with our more sedentary lifestyles, has undoubtedly played a key role. In the UK, two thirds of adults are classified as overweight or obese. According to the recent House of Lords report, over a fifth of children are overweight or obese before they even start school, and by the time they leave school, that number has doubled.

As a children's doctor, I have seen children with significant medical complications from obesity, including a child of 12 who weighed over 120 kg and a child of

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

nine who weighed over 95 kg. As the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) said, doctors and other clinicians have a responsibility to let people know of the harms of obesity, but they do not always do so. That is partly because of time constraints and because there is not necessarily a clear path to point the individual towards. Such messages can also be received with hostility, which is another deterrent.

As hon. Members have said, obesity leads to health problems. The excess body fat disrupts the normal bodily functions, amplifying the risk of heart disease, diabetes, cancer and arthritis while weakening the body's ability to fight infections. During the pandemic, an obese person had a 40% higher chance of dying from covid-19 than their peers of a healthy weight. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) spoke of the human consequences. An obese mother is more likely to suffer from complications during pregnancy. She is more likely to miss out on important life events as the child grows up, and when her grandchildren are born, she will have a lower chance of being there to enjoy them.

What is causing this obesity? At its most fundamental level, overweight and obesity are the storage of fat as surplus energy—energy consumed as food that was extra to requirements—but the reasons may be more complex. Many hon. Members have discussed the lack of affordable food, but they did not recognise or heed support for those growing our food and our fruit and veg. Instead, this Government have so far attacked our farmers with high taxes during their lifetime and at death. That will only increase the price of fruit and veg. Lincolnshire grows 20% of the country's vegetables, but the Labour Government seek to carpet our beautiful farmland with miles and miles of solar panels, reducing the area available for growing healthy fruit and veg, increasing imports and prices.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) said, time is key. For families in which both parents are working, finding time to collect children, prepare wholesome meals from scratch, help with homework and get children to bed on time can lead to pressure to grab quick food or use packet sauces. A YouGov survey from 2022 found that a third of British people feel that they need a recipe to produce food from scratch, and one in six feel uncomfortable even with a recipe, so confidence in the kitchen needs to be improved. It is also worth remarking that genetics play a part, as can medications and medical conditions. Hormonal responses to food restriction also play a part, so once someone has gained weight once, it is not necessarily as easy as just saying, "Eat less".

I have spent a great deal of my time in Parliament sitting on the Health and Social Care Committee, where the need for greater focus on prevention was continually raised. Nowhere better is that illustrated than on the issue of obesity. For example, Public Health England's laudable Better Health diet campaign that ran from 2020-21 cost only 0.05% of what the NHS spends on obesity and overweight treatment annually. Healthy eating begins with education. People should know how to create healthy nutritious meals on a budget, as the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) said. I appreciate the work done by the previous Government to expand nutritional education in state schools, and I

would like to mention Washingborough academy and its headteacher Jason O'Rourke, who have won awards for locally produced healthy school foods.

People also need to know what is in their food so they can make informed choices when they eat on the go. The Conservatives took action to display calorie information on menus, so that people can make informed decisions. That can also influence portion sizes. The previous Government introduced the soft drinks levy in 2018, and in 2022 we restricted promotions on foods high in salt, sugar and fat. Recent data from the NHS health survey shows that obesity rates among adults have stabilised over the past five years, and the number of overweight or obese children is now at its lowest level since 2000—although I note that those figures have continued to rise in Scotland and Wales.

Let me turn to advertising. Does advertising work? Of course it does. If I say, "The red car and the blue car had a race," I am sure that Members of a similar age to me would know which sweet that line advertised. If I asked them which sweet would be "Just enough to give your kids a treat," they would know exactly which one I meant. *[Interruption.]* The Minister is nodding—as are you, Madam Deputy Speaker. But is the problem the adverts, or is it what they are advertising? Is what they are advertising the same as or different from what they were advertising 20 years ago?

At the moment, the Government's approach to advertising seems a little wrong-headed. Their plans to restrict the advertising of junk food before 9 pm paints with a very broad brush, and muesli, porridge and rice cakes are included under the ban. However, the NHS website says that porridge is a healthy breakfast. Does the Minister disagree with the NHS? Do the Government intend to implement a similar policy to that of Transport for London under the Mayor of London, which allows the advertising of fried chicken burgers but not of strawberries and cream? The Minister needs to think carefully about what he wants to promote as a healthy and diet and then work from there.

Before the general election, the previous Health Secretary asked the National Institute for Health and Care Research to gather evidence on the impact of ultra-processed foods on health. Have the Government developed a strategy to address the prevalence of ultra-processed foods in our diet? The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) mentioned that many such foods contain artificial ingredients. One of my concerns is that a ban or tax on high fat, salt and sugar foods causes reformulation, but not necessarily to take sugar out and make an item less sweet, for example; it can be to add sweeteners and other chemical substitutes that may also trigger addictive eating behaviours. That may be more harmful and retains the sweetness, so it does not change people's need for that sort of food.

Members have mentioned the prospect of new pharmaceuticals such as Ozempic in tackling obesity. The Government have expressed an interest in exploring that further, and we welcome the new partnership with life science companies to consider the potential of pharmaceuticals in tackling some of the challenges facing the country. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) talked powerfully of his use of Wegovy to lose 5 stone, and I congratulate him on his success in doing so. One important point that he made about that class of drugs

is that they are not by themselves a silver bullet; they require willpower and people need to work with not against them, as he said. They are not without potentially severe side effects, and as they might only work when an individual is using them, they may require lifelong use. We need a judicious use of intervention with pharmaceuticals, combined with the necessary education and lifestyle changes for weight loss to be sustainable in the long term.

This debate has focused on the issue of nanny state versus the freedom to choose. This is a Labour Government, so of course they are very keen for widespread state intervention, but what we need is not a list of bans and taxes but a coherent policy based on a clear understanding of what they mean by “healthy diet”; a strategy for food security that includes more home-grown food; education on diet and cooking; the removal of the stigma associated with being overweight or obese, which many Members mentioned; the avoidance of bans and taxes leading to reformulation with additives and processing; and, as obesity is such a difficult condition to reverse, the judicious use of medication. Most importantly, prevention is better than cure, so let us focus on the children.

9.43 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne):** I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for ensuring that this debate took place, and I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) for securing it in the first place. I am also grateful to all Members for their valuable contributions. We have heard speeches from across the House, including from my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi), for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman), for Ilford South (Jas Athwal), for Swindon North (Will Stone), for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne), for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), for Worthing West (Dr Cooper), for Southend East and Rochford (Mr Alaba), for Blackpool South (Chris Webb), for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan), for Dudley (Sonia Kumar), for Dartford (Jim Dickson), for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) and for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley).

On the Opposition Benches, we heard from the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), who I have to say looks so healthy as a consequence of the medication he is taking. I remember what he looked like before—he is a shadow of his former self. We also heard from the hon. Members for Newbury (Mr Dillon), for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies), for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella), and then obviously from the Opposition spokespeople for the Liberal Democrats and the official Opposition.

The United Kingdom has an obesity crisis. It poses serious challenges to our health, adds preventable pressure on the NHS, and restricts our economic productivity. I am reassured that none of us in the Chamber today underestimates the scale or importance of the task ahead, and we all recognise the need for action. I am proud that this Labour Government have already acted on manifesto commitments in several key areas, as I will outline, but I am also aware that much more needs to be done.

Over two thirds of adults are living with excess weight, and around 36% of children are living with obesity or are overweight by the time they leave primary school. That is appalling, but while it is shocking by itself, that average hides the deep inequalities we see in obesity. Children living in poorer areas are more than twice as likely to be living with obesity than those living in the least deprived areas. That has a huge impact on our lives, increasing the risk of many serious diseases—as we have heard—as well as exacerbating mental health issues and reducing the years that we and our loved ones can expect to live in good health. Almost 22% of all working-age people are economically inactive, and much of that is due to long-term health conditions caused or exacerbated by obesity. The cost of obesity-related conditions to the NHS now stands at £11.4 billion a year, and the cost to wider society is a staggering £74 billion every year.

I am so proud that we are committed to raising the healthiest generation of children ever. That means going further on prevention and tackling the drivers of obesity. Over recent decades in the UK, food and drink that is calorie dense, nutrient poor and less healthy has become cheaper. It is vital that we ensure our policies continue to drive companies to make food and drink healthier. That is why this Government took action to uprate the soft drinks industry levy in the October Budget. That levy has already taken thousands of tonnes of sugar out of the drinks we consume every day, and I give credit to George Osborne, the Conservative Chancellor in the coalition Government, who introduced that measure. Uprating the levy is a key part of keeping it effective and continuing to drive reformulation towards healthier products.

However, this is not just about what is in our food and drinks; less healthy foods are more heavily promoted, marketed and advertised than ever before. One third of the food industry's advertising budget is spent on marketing confectionery, snacks, desserts and soft drinks, while only around 1% of that budget is spent on marketing fruit and vegetables. It is therefore not a surprise that our children want to eat those products. One study estimated that 6.4% of UK childhood obesity is attributable to junk food TV advertising. That is why this Government have already met our manifesto commitment to lay the secondary legislation required to ensure the ban on junk food ads targeting our kids comes in from October this year. This includes a 9 pm TV watershed for the advertising of less healthy food and drink products, and a restriction on paid-for online advertising of all these products.

**Jim Shannon:** The Minister is giving a very comprehensive response, and it is much appreciated. One of the things I asked for in my speech—I know he will do this, but I think we could probably do it better—is to look at initiatives in each of the regions of Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales that could complement the policy driven from here. Is it the Minister's intention to do that with the regional Administrations?

**Andrew Gwynne:** The advertising regulations of course cover the whole of the United Kingdom, but this Labour Government have a good working relationship with the devolved Governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. We have the intergovernmental ministerial meetings, and we have been liaising closely on a whole

[Andrew Gwynne]

range of public health measures, including the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, directly with ministerial counterparts in the devolved Governments. I want that relationship to deepen and mature because that is good governance across the whole United Kingdom.

We know that our chances of accessing healthy food depends on where people live. Children living in less affluent areas see five times more fast-food outlets on their high streets. That is why it is so important that strengthened the new national planning policy framework. Local authorities now have clearer powers to block fast-food outlets near schools, and also where children and young people congregate, to stop the relentless targeting of children and young people by the fast-food industry. Making the healthier choice the easier choice is a major part of achieving our shift to prevention. We will continue to look at ways to support people to make and sustain changes in their diet in line with the Government's "Eatwell Guide".

This may be a good point at which to clarify our position on ultra-processed foods. There are concerning associations between ultra-processed foods and negative health outcomes, including obesity. However, where the evidence is not yet clear is whether the negative health outcomes are due to processing or to these products tending to be high in calories, sugar, saturated fat and salt. I want to reassure hon. Members across the House that many ultra-processed foods are already captured by the existing healthy eating advice, policy actions and regulations relating to HFSS foods. Our scientific advisory committee on nutrition continues to monitor the evidence on ultra-processed foods, and we will commission further research where needed.

In my last few minutes, I will turn to a number of the issues that have been raised. First, just to reassure the shadow Minister, porridge oats will not be banned. The majority of porridge, muesli and granola products will not be affected by the restrictions, but some less healthy versions with added sugar, chocolate or syrup could be affected. To be in scope, products must fall within one of the categories of food and drink set out in the schedule to the advertising regulations and be defined as less healthy by the 2004-05 nutrient profiling model. For example, categories include but are not limited to soft drinks with added sugar, savoury snacks such as crisps, breakfast cereals, confectionery, ice cream and pizza. Despite recent media reports, the majority of porridge products will not be affected.

The right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold made a really important point about stigma, and he is absolutely right that we really have to tackle stigma. Our genetics and our will power have not changed in the last 50 years. What has changed is the food environment and that we are bombarded with marketing for unhealthy foods. We already know that the issue is even worse in some of the poorer communities.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham and the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin mentioned accessibility to healthier affordable food. No child should live in poverty; that is why our ministerial taskforce is exploring all levers available across Government to give children the best start in life. We will tackle food insecurity by rolling out free breakfast clubs in every primary school and continuing to provide free healthy food during the holidays for children who receive free school meals. It is really important that we continue with that.

There is no silver bullet for obesity. This debate has shown that obesity is not just about health; it is about food, tax, education, business, employment, advertising and more. It is both a national challenge and a challenge within local communities. Our health mission is focused on shifting towards a more preventive approach which will benefit this agenda. In addition the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has announced an ambitious new cross-Government food strategy to work with the food industry to deliver on our goals for food security, health, affordability and the environment.

Obesity is a hugely complex challenge, but tackling it is a key part of achieving the change needed in this country. This Government are committed to taking effective action and I look forward to updating Members on what we do next.

9.56 pm

**Dr Opher:** I thank the Minister and all who have spoken because this has been a genuinely interesting debate about an essential topic. I would just like to say in summary that the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) needs to go into the supermarket when she is really busy and pick up a tasty healthy snack. If the Government can get people doing that, it will be fantastic. I say to the Minister that the House is behind him being radical; it is not the time for non-intervention.

I thank all who have contributed. I missed supper and am starving, so I am going to go and have a healthy snack.

**Hon. Members:** Hear, hear!

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the impact of food and diet on obesity.

## Business without Debate

### Finance Committee

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 9(6)),*

That Phil Brickell be discharged from the Finance Committee and Luke Akehurst be added.—(Samantha Dixon, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

*Question agreed to.*

## Crewe Railway Station

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

9.57 pm

**Connor Naismith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to address this House on an issue that I am no stranger to. I want to speak today to recognise the importance of Crewe railway station not just to my constituents, but to the entirety of Cheshire East, north-west England and the nation as a whole.

Crewe station has been a linchpin of the UK rail network. It is one of the only train stations in the country that provides 360° connectivity that is unparalleled in its scope and criticality to the region. The station has 12 platforms, over 3 million passengers pass through annually, and more than 2,000 trains use the station each week. It is incredible to look at the connections and destinations we can travel to from Crewe. Passengers can directly travel to Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham, London, Cardiff, Glasgow, Edinburgh and countless other destinations.

**Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): One destination that people cannot currently get to from Crewe is Middlewich in my constituency. Middlewich is about eight and a half miles from Crewe, and its population has increased by 1,000 over the past 10 years and now stands at around 14,500. Indeed, it is the largest town in Cheshire without a railway station. Does my hon. Friend agree that as Network Rail reviews and renews the infrastructure around Crewe, provision needs to be made for additional capacity for future services, including to Middlewich?

**Connor Naismith:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a strong case for his constituents in Middlewich.

10 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

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

**Connor Naismith:** It is fair to say that the opportunities that opening the station of Middlewich would present to the country and to Cheshire are exciting.

Crewe station is a genuine strategic asset for local and national infrastructure.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate. Does he not agree that to meet carbon targets, connectivity is essential, and rail is needed as an integrated part of that plan? That, as well as subsequent upgrades to existing stations and frequent bus links to rail stations, all must be part of the net zero conversation.

**Connor Naismith:** It would not be an Adjournment debate in this place without an intervention from the hon. Gentleman, and he is correct. I will go on to say a little more about the importance of rail to our climate objectives.

The significance of Crewe train station goes beyond its enormous benefit to the rail network. It provides and has provided in its lifetime critical economic benefits.

**Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab) *rose—*

**Aphra Brandreth** (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con) *rose—*

**Connor Naismith:** Two at the same time. I will take my hon. Friend first.

**Rachel Taylor:** My hon. Friend often shares that wait at Euston station, waiting for the screen to turn from blue to green when getting on the train to Crewe, which also stops at Atherstone in my constituency. My constituents in North Warwickshire and Bedworth have had to bear the brunt of the works digging the tunnel through from Birmingham to link HS2 to the north. Does he agree that linking the HS2 network all the way to Crewe is essential for opening up economic prosperity to that area? That will make the heartache worth while for my constituents.

**Connor Naismith:** My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I completely agree that connecting phase 1 of HS2 up to Crewe is crucial, if we are to see the real economic benefits of that project.

**Aphra Brandreth:** I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing this Adjournment debate, and he is speaking well on this important topic. We are constituency neighbours, and while Crewe station is in his constituency, it provides vital transport links and an important boost to the local economy for many people living in my constituency. Does he agree that Crewe station is in urgent need of upgrades and that, in the light of the cancellation of phase 2 of HS2—assuming that is happening—we have an opportunity to improve existing infrastructure, such as electrifying the track between Crewe and Chester? That would do so much to benefit my constituents and pave the way for the reopening of Beeston and Tarporley station.

**Connor Naismith:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention and for bringing the opportunity to work on a cross-party basis across Cheshire and the wider area to secure key benefits for our constituents. She is absolutely right to say that electrification of the line from Crewe to Chester would be transformative. It could deliver an additional £25 billion in gross value added and create more than 70,000 jobs over the next 20 years. Those are crucial benefits.

**Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I have the pleasure of being the constituency neighbour of both my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth). My hon. Friend has touched on the communities who benefit from Crewe station, including those from Madeley, Balterley and Betley, and many of my Newcastle-under-Lyme constituents use Crewe on a daily basis. Indeed, when Avanti chooses to mess up its timetable, I have to go to Crewe when I am going home.

As my hon. Friend has touched on HS2, does he agree that rebuilding trust will be really important? Many of my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme, as in Stoke-on-Trent South, have faced the brunt of the

[Adam Jogee]

failures of HS2 to date, and many people have waited many years for compensation. So as we look to have this conversation, trust and restoring trust must be at its heart.

**Connor Naismith:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is absolutely right to point out some of the negative impacts of the HS2 project on his constituents and, indeed, some of my constituents. It is right that the Government have taken the necessary steps to get the mismanagement of the project under control. It is right that they continue to do that and fully engage with those negatively impacted so far.

**Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, Stoke-on-Trent sits on an offshoot of the west coast main line and provides a vital east-west link between Crewe and Derby, which also requires electrification. Does he agree that previous HS2 plans severely reduced services through Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, and that any future developments must not negatively impact this vital region for growth?

**Connor Naismith:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point. That is why it is crucial that those of us who are impacted by HS2 and the discussion around improved future rail infrastructure work together to get the best possible alternative plan on the table and being looked at.

I will make some progress. Within my constituency, Crewe station has strong ties to engineering and advanced manufacturing firms such as Bentley and Alstom in Crewe. In the surrounding regions, many businesses exist because of the opportunities that Crewe railway station provides, enabling supply chains and employment opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach and ensuring the growth of local businesses.

Crewe railway station serves as a vital node along the west coast main line, which connects London to the midlands, the north-west and Scotland. Approximately 75% of all freight trains that use the west coast main line pass through Crewe. Again, that is testament to the paramount nature of the station.

However, while I speak openly about the amazing things that Crewe station offers to transport connectivity and our economy across the country, it is clear to both residents and experts that it faces significant challenges. The catchment area around Crewe station is seeing rapid growth because of its connectivity to major economic centres in the UK.

**Mrs Sarah Russell** (Congleton) (Lab): My constituents in Alsager, Holmes Chapel, Sandbach and the surrounding villages either drive directly to Crewe or take trains and transfer there. Does my hon. Friend agree that my constituents, like his, want more reliable journeys through an improved station and, moreover, that better transport links could bring economic growth for passengers and others?

**Connor Naismith:** My hon. Friend is quite correct, and do not let anybody tell hon. Members that I secured the debate on narrow constituency interests. The fact that Crewe is such a central hub for connectivity means

that better connections from Crewe station mean better connections for people living in Sandbach, Holmes Chapel, Alsager and others, since they are largely travelling via Crewe for major journeys. [Interruption.] Indeed, Newcastle-under-Lyme as well.

The challenges in terms of Crewe station are significant. We see growth in population due to the station's links to those major economic centres. Its platforms are too few and too narrow to cope with projected future demand. On top of that, the entrances have limited space, and there are often leaks in the roofs, which do not cover entire platforms. Indeed, we saw an example of that on social media just before Christmas when one of the roofs caved in and there was water pouring through the ceiling, which the staff had to collect in buckets. Crewe rightly boasts of its position as a rail hub, but the condition of the station is ill befitting as a front door to a town with such a rich rail heritage.

**Andrew Cooper:** My hon. Friend is being extremely generous in giving way. He makes an excellent point about the state of Crewe station. I have spoken to business leaders who had been considering investing in Cheshire but have been put off by the sheer dilapidation of the station. Does he agree that, given that HS2 appears not to be coming to Crewe, we must not wait to invest in the station and bring it up to a 21st century standard?

**Connor Naismith:** I agree. I described the station as the front door to Crewe, but it is also the shop window for investment due to the rail heritage in the town. It is important that we use the station as an advert for jobs and investment across the town and the wider region. Whether or not HS2 ultimately comes to Crewe, that will be an important issue.

The ability of Crewe station to act as a critical transport hub has been constrained by the challenges that I have described. Even Network Rail has identified the need to improve platform capacity and length to accommodate modern stock and address concerns about accessibility and integration with other modes of transport. The challenges that Crewe station faces to function effectively also limit capacity on the west coast main line, so its limitations have a cascading effect on the entire rail network, reducing reliability and increasing journey times.

The plans for HS2 would have seen Crewe form a central cog in phase 2a, connecting high-speed rail in Birmingham to the wider network as a key interchange. Projections suggested that doing so could support the creation of 100,000 jobs and provide billions to the regional economy in the short term, not to mention the logistical benefits for rail operators.

It is no secret that my view is that the last Government botched the job, as they did in so many areas. That left many communities across the north of England—perhaps none more so than the one I am proud to represent—demoralised and disillusioned that they had been left behind once again. The last Government's decision has also meant that the modernisation of Crewe station has been put on hold, which raises even more questions about its future. It is not just Crewe station but the rail infrastructure in our country that, unfortunately, is not up to standard. That will only be exacerbated as time ticks on without crucial investment.

I am thankful to Network Rail, alongside Siemens, for recently completing a £190 million overhaul of signalling around the station over the Christmas period, for the benefit of the wider west coast main line. However, I truly believe that there is a need to go further. Should the Government not commit to phase 2, they should at least consider the many outstanding alternatives that organisations have put forward, and the position of Crewe within those plans. Projects such as Growth Track 360 and the Midlands-North West rail link are two vital pieces of work that recognise the need to invest in our railways for growth across the region, and Crewe features as an integral part of both proposals.

Investing in rail goes beyond the economic benefits, despite their substantial nature. It is also about addressing the climate crisis, getting cars and heavy goods vehicles off the road and getting modern electrified rail lines to create a transport system that is fit for the future. In 2022-23, rail contributed 1.3% of the UK's total emissions from transport, but represented a proportionately overwhelming 9% of all passenger kilometres travelled.

Furthermore, a journey from London to Glasgow by train uses less than a third of the kilograms of CO<sub>2</sub> of petrol cars, and around a sixth of the CO<sub>2</sub> of the equivalent journey by aeroplane. Transport in total accounts for 27% of all greenhouse gas emissions—the largest contributor in our society—and shifting journeys from road to rail can play a crucial role in the Government meeting their climate targets. Rail travel is one of the most sustainable forms of transport. By investing in Crewe, we can invest in the electrification of the line and a green future for local transport.

I thank the House for listening to my speech and for listening to me sing the praises of my constituency's rail heritage. I offer my apologies for bending the Minister's ear on the subject once again, but I truly believe that transport, particularly rail, will be a central part of any effort to boost economic growth in the north. I am certain that my constituency is ready and waiting to play an active role in that.

I firmly believe that Crewe station is a national treasure. Despite the short-term constraints on public finances, which are absolutely clear and which I fully appreciate, I hope that Ministers see that, too. I gently urge the Government to recognise how critical this station could be for future infrastructure projects and alternatives to the northern leg of HS2, which can bring vast benefits to regional economic growth and improvements both to rail connectivity and to infrastructure.

The Government must take decisive action to secure the future of rail in our country. Crewe station has been the beating heart of our rail network for almost 200 years. I ask the Minister to ensure that that remains the case.

10.16 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Connor Naismith) on securing this debate. I thank him for continuing to raise the importance of Crewe as a railway station. He never needs to apologise for his advocacy. He is right that Crewe is and will remain a vital component of the rail network. After all, it was the opening of the railway station in 1837 that led Crewe to develop from a small settlement to the proud railway town that it is today.

My hon. Friend is clearly not alone today in recognising the importance of Crewe railway station. I welcome contributions from a range of hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), for Congleton (Mrs Russell), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) and for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) and the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth)—not forgetting, of course, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

As my hon. Friend set out, and as other Members have confirmed, Crewe station is now a crucial transport hub, providing 360° connectivity where four regional lines converge with the west coast main line, providing long-distance links to London and Scotland and the great cities of the midlands and the north, as well as more local and regional links.

**Mrs Russell:** I want to take a moment to raise the issues around Sandbach station. There is no accessibility at the station, which serves approximately 20,000 people. The only route to Manchester for Sandbach residents is to take a train to Crewe, where they can change accessibly—assuming that everything is working—and then take a train back to Manchester. Does the Minister agree that this needs addressing?

**Lilian Greenwood:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to advocate for more accessible journeys on the rail network, because we want everyone to be able to travel on our railways. I am sure that my officials will have heard those comments, and I will convey them to my noble Friend Lord Hendy, the Rail Minister, as I am sure he will want to look at that.

Crewe's location is strategically important to the railway, thanks to the connectivity that it provides for passenger, freight and engineering services. No other UK station is served by more individual train operators. With more than 470 services on a typical weekday, there are just 30 minutes between the last train of the evening and the first of the following morning. It is not surprising to hear that since its opening it has formed a critical part of the UK's transport infrastructure and will no doubt continue to do so for future generations.

Transport is an essential part of the Government's mission to rebuild Britain. For that reason, we committed to improving rail connectivity across the midlands and the north while working with devolved leaders, as we set out in our manifesto. The previous Government's decision to cancel phase 2 of HS2 was met with huge disappointment by leaders and communities in Crewe and, frankly, a lot more widely. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme highlighted, the previous Government's appalling mismanagement of HS2 has undermined trust in our ability to build new railways and perhaps in rail more broadly. For the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich, it meant the end of a decade of efforts to plan the benefits that the new high-speed railway would have brought to the town. Now, with the difficult position that this Government have inherited, our immediate focus is on the safe delivery of HS2 between Birmingham and London at the lowest reasonable cost.

However, while we have been clear that we cannot reverse the previous Government's decision to cancel phase 2 of HS2, we recognise concerns about rail capacity

*[Lilian Greenwood]*

and connectivity between Birmingham and Manchester. We are considering a range of potential solutions that will have to be carefully balanced with the very difficult fiscal context in which we are operating. That could include optimising services, delivering smaller-scale infrastructure interventions or the proposals set out by the Mayor of Greater Manchester and the Mayor of the West Midlands for a new railway line between Birmingham and Manchester.

**Adam Jogee:** I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. May I urge her, as she seeks to consider options on capacity, to ensure that there is real and meaningful engagement with the communities that will be impacted, as mine in Newcastle-under-Lyme and those in many other parts of north Staffordshire have been? Without that real engagement, the trust that we talked about earlier simply cannot be built.

**Lilian Greenwood:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the work to engage local communities is vital as we develop future transport plans.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich for his passion in advocating for his constituency and ensuring that any eventual decisions take into account the role and needs of Crewe station, which plays such a vital role on the west coast main line. Of course, there are other constituencies that we need to consider, too. Those will certainly be on the Government's mind as we consider different options. My colleague the Rail Minister had a very constructive meeting with Mayors at the end of last year; he also met my hon. Friend to discuss Crewe's role in the proposals.

**Rachel Taylor:** Does the Minister agree that decisiveness is the key to delivering rail services at a reasonable cost, rather than the continual escalation in cost that was a symptom of HS2 under the previous Government? Does she also agree that in looking at connectivity between London and Manchester and increasing capacity all the way along the west coast main line, the time to act is now, because there simply are not enough trains to carry the passengers who need to travel in those directions?

**Lilian Greenwood:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the need for more capacity. The west coast main line is particularly constrained. What we know from the previous Government's approach is that constantly chopping and changing on a project is precisely the way to lead to an escalation in costs and delays to delivery. We do not want to repeat those mistakes.

There is little that I can share with the House at this stage about the future, but I can assure all hon. Members that we will continue to take their views and those of local leaders into consideration as we develop our plans. While we recognise the uncertainty that this period of review is causing local residents, it is important that we take the necessary time not only to get this right, but to

learn lessons and ensure that there is no possibility of this Government's repeating the mistakes that characterised the last Government's plans for major rail investment. Where they failed so miserably, we are determined finally to deliver the benefits that local communities expect. I assure all hon. Members that this Government will not tolerate poor performance on our railways and that we will hold operators to account.

**Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op):** The Minister is making an excellent speech. While she is looking at the future connectivity plans, may I make a pitch that she should consider connectivity between Stoke-on-Trent and Manchester airport? We do not currently have a direct service, but business leaders in Staffordshire tell me that it would be huge for our growth potential.

**Lilian Greenwood:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I am sure that the Rail Minister will have heard him loud and clear and will consider the matter.

In the meantime, while we consider the range of proposals that have been drawn to my attention this evening, there is a clear need for interventions at Crewe station to address ageing assets. The Government have provided Network Rail with £44.1 billion for renewals, operations and maintenance in England and Wales for the period between 2024 and 2029. In turn, Network Rail has developed a programme of interventions to deliver essential renewals in the Crewe area.

I am pleased to assure hon. Members that this work will include replacement of the station's roof and renewal of power systems, signalling and track assets such as switches and crossings. This is a significant programme amounting to over £270 million, which needed to be re-scoped and re-planned at pace to follow the last Government's decision to cancel phase 2 of HS2. As the scope of the work develops, we will collaborate with Network Rail to identify any opportunities for investment above and beyond essential renewals. In parallel, officials in the Department for Transport are already working with Cheshire East council on better integration between transport modes at Crewe, including road and rail.

I reiterate that transport is an essential part of the Government's mission to rebuild Britain. Crewe has played and will continue to play a central role in our railway network. We will continue to work with hon. Members, local leaders and the communities that they represent to ensure that we get the delivery of infrastructure projects right. As I have said, I welcome this debate, because it is vital that we continue to discuss our transport projects openly and transparently. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions this evening and for their continued contributions as we work to deliver the railway network that our country requires.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.27 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

Monday 20 January 2025

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

## Family Visas: Income Requirement

4.30 pm

**Irene Campbell** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 652602 relating to the income requirement for family visas.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard, on my first opportunity to present a debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I thank Shannon Korkmaz for launching this petition and starting a very important conversation that has allowed those affected to have their voices heard today. It is a great achievement that the petition gathered more than 100,000 signatures. It reads:

“We believe it’s inhumane for the Government to do this to British citizens and others entitled to family visas, and that this policy is punishing people for failing in love with someone who has a different nationality.”

The minimum income requirement for family visas was introduced in 2012, and at that time it was set at an annual income of £18,600. The coalition Government stated that the purpose of the policy was to ensure that family migrants are fully supported when integrating into the UK, while not being a burden on the taxpayer and public services. The figure of £18,600 in 2012 equated to £26,250 in December 2024, based on the Bank of England’s inflation calculator.

An individual needs a family visa to live with a family member in the UK for more than six months. The income threshold remained at £18,600 from 2012 until April 2024, when it was increased to £29,000. A person can apply for a family visa to live with a spouse, fiancé, child, parent or relative who will provide them with long-term care. Spouses on the family visa can stay in the UK for two years and nine months, while a fiancé can stay for six months. Income can be from employment or self-employment, cash savings above £16,000, money from a pension, or non-work income such as property rentals or dividends.

In April 2024, alongside a collection of other policies aimed at lowering net migration, the then Government raised the income threshold to £29,000. Their intention was to incrementally raise it to £34,500 and finally to £38,700 by early 2025, as highlighted in the petition. In response, the petitioners stated:

“Most people in the UK don’t make £38,700 per year and now may face the choice of a lifetime without their partner or leaving their own country because they fell in love and can’t meet the financial requirement for the family visa.

We believe it’s inhumane for the Government to do this to British citizens and others entitled to family visas”.

I will say more about that later.

**Afzal Khan** (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Many of my constituents have signed the petition, and they say that they struggle to have a family life in the UK due to the previous Government’s 55% increase in the income requirement for family visas. That includes many individuals who work in charities or in public services and are

giving back to our communities. Does my hon. Friend agree that those unattainable requirements make it disproportionately difficult for some families to be together?

**Irene Campbell:** I agree, and I will say a bit more about that later.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Ind): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. Does she agree that the right to family life, which is rightly enshrined in article 8 of the European convention on human rights, is one of the most fundamental rights that individuals are afforded? Central to this debate is systemic inequality, such as the fact that women are still paid less than men due to entrenched structural pay disparities, and that young people who are in the early stages of their careers often earn less as they build their futures.

Systemic inequality also affects those from lower-income regions such as West Yorkshire and Bradford, which I represent. The hon. Lady will be aware that the Centre for Cities released a report this morning saying that those who live in places such as West Yorkshire, including my constituency, earn £20,000 less. Does she agree that the current system being considered by the Migration Advisory Committee should be scrapped, and that a fair requirement would be one in line with the national living wage?

**Irene Campbell:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; much of what he has raised is in my opening speech.

Since the petition was launched, and following the general election last summer, the Government announced that the threshold would be held at £29,000 until the Migration Advisory Committee completes a new review, which is expected to be in June 2025. However, when an e-petition reaches 10,000 signatures, it gets a Government response, as this one did in January 2024. The then Government outlined their arguments as to why the minimum income requirement should be increased to £38,700, stating that the policy was part of a larger package intended to curb immigration and net migration. They added that the minimum income requirement was set with the intention that family migrants

“could be supported at a reasonable level...and to help ensure they can participate sufficiently in everyday life to facilitate their integration into British society.”

However, in early 2023, the House of Lords published a report called “All families matter: An inquiry into family migration”. It stated that

“applicants and sponsors can feel like second-class citizens and are reluctant or unable to take full part in British society before reaching settlement.”

It summarised:

“Current migration policies are at odds with the Government’s commitment to family life.”

It further stated that the family migration rules are “complex and inconsistent”, they fail “both families and society”, and they “should be simplified”.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): The hon. Member said that the rules are counterproductive to family life. Does she agree that they are also counterproductive to growing our economy? In my constituency, where I have a number of signatories, the

[Wendy Chamberlain]

challenge is recruiting people into in-demand areas such as hospitality, research and dentistry. The rules are stopping the economic growth that we need.

**Irene Campbell:** I do not disagree with those comments.

In response to the proposed policy changes, the non-profit organisation Reunite Families UK filed an application for judicial review in June 2024, supported by the Good Law Project. It argued that the rise of the minimum income requirement to £38,700 was made without analysis and in breach of critical public law duties. Many migrants' rights groups and campaigners have been outspoken against the minimum income requirement. In relation to the legal case, Caroline Coombs, the director of Reunite Families UK, who is in the Gallery today, said:

"In the last decade, this policy has somehow continued to exist under the radar devastating countless British and settled citizens and their partners, families and children. The general public have no idea this policy exists until sadly they come up against it".

Furthermore, Reunite Families found that the minimum income requirement can prevent integration of mixed nationality families for myriad reasons. The rising financial costs of visas and savings lead to instability, and temporary visas also make it harder to secure housing, access education and secure appropriate employment. It is important to note that those on temporary visas cannot claim benefits and can access NHS services only by paying into the NHS through the immigration health surcharge—I will say more about that later.

Many people might say that this is an anti-family policy. Increasing the minimum income requirement can create single-parent families and put an incredible stress on all members of the family, particularly children. A British citizen abroad, for example, may have to return to the UK for a variety of reasons, such as a need to care for an elderly relative still residing in the UK. If they do not already meet the minimum income requirement, they may have to return to the UK alone and wait for an indefinite amount of time to reunite their family.

It is said that many people who return to the UK are unable to gain employment immediately, but they may only begin their family visa application once six months of minimum income can be evidenced, or one year of income if they are self-employed. It is important to note that the non-British partner's earnings are not included. If the applicant's income drops below the threshold, the Home Office application process, which can take up to three months, must begin again.

Statistics from the Office for National Statistics show that the threshold of £38,700—I am sorry to keep repeating that figure—is unrealistic for most people living outside London and south-east England. The median annual income is £38,500 for those living in Scotland, £35,600 for those living in Wales and £34,900 for those living in Northern Ireland, so many people in valuable—indeed, essential—jobs are paid less than £38,700 annually. Yet the people who do those jobs will be penalised for wanting to marry someone of a different nationality and are left with few other options, if any, to prove that they would be able to support a partner.

For example, salaries for newly qualified teachers in England start at £31,650, for newly qualified nurses at around £30,000 and for police constables at £28,500.

Also, if a store assistant at Aldi makes £12.40 an hour, that equates to £25,792 yearly, assuming that they work 40 hours a week.

**Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is even rarer for young people who come to this country to earn £38,700, which means that most of them are excluded under the proposed threshold?

**Irene Campbell:** I do agree.

To continue, an executive officer working in the Department for Work and Pensions earns £29,500, while an administrative officer's salary in the civil service starts at £23,000. Nobody in any of those groups would qualify for the proposed minimum income requirement through their salary alone.

Indeed, the Migration Observatory, an independent group at the University of Oxford, estimated that around 50% of the UK working population would be unable to qualify on earnings alone with the current income requirement of £29,000, and that 70% of the working population earn less than £38,700. In addition, the charity Reunite Families UK has emphasised that the higher threshold affects women more than men, because women are more likely to have caring responsibilities and to earn less on average, and are also less likely to work full time. The median earnings of UK women who work full time are below £38,700 across all age groups; the highest median earnings figure is £35,250 for 40 to 49-year-olds.

The Migration Observatory also pointed out that the new set of policies would mean that, in certain circumstances, British workers in the same job as migrant workers would face stricter restrictions than migrant workers. For example, health professionals in the NHS who come to the UK on a health and care worker visa would be able to bring partners who are not UK citizens with them.

It is clear that the visa rules are long and complex, with many exceptions and differing prices for all circumstances. The family visa fee is £1,846 per person if the applicant is applying from outside of the UK and £1,258 per person if the applicant is applying from inside the UK. Those fees are non-refundable, so if an application is unsuccessful, the applicant is obviously not refunded.

In addition, there is the immigration health surcharge, for which the minimum cost for two and a half years is £2,587.50 for an adult and £1,940 for a child. If people are staying in the UK for two years and nine months, the charges rise to £3,105 for an adult and £2,328 for a child, and if they are staying for five years, they rise to £5,175 for an adult and £3,880 for a child. Reunite Families UK advises that the total cost of all those fees for a family on a five-year route to settlement can be over £10,000, while the total cost on a 10-year route can be around £20,000.

**Brian Mathew** (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that if the Government feel that some minimum income requirement is necessary or appropriate, it should never be greater than that necessary to render an immigrant unable to claim benefits, as Theresa May's original sum was intended to do?

**Irene Campbell:** I am trying to interpret the question. I am not sure whether I agree—I would need to fully consider it—so I will carry on.

**Imran Hussain:** The hon. Lady continues to make an excellent case and she is right to focus on the extortionate fees. She mentioned the current figure of over £10,000, which ordinary working families struggle to pay or simply cannot pay. She also referred to Reunite Families UK, which does excellent work and has said that 23% of families have to wait longer than seven years to be reunited. Does she agree that that continuing injustice needs to be addressed? Those are not just stats, but real people.

**Irene Campbell:** I agree, and this debate is an excellent opportunity for that.

It is also important to highlight that, while applications under the work routes can be processed in just 15 working days, family visas can take anywhere from eight weeks to 12 months. Often, families report requiring specialist legal advice to navigate the system successfully and to try to avoid those long waiting periods, which obviously has a financial impact as well, although I do not have any costs for that. Delaying arrival does not decrease net migration, but it does increase the personal and financial strain on families. It could be construed that the policy effectively views a relationship ending and a family splitting up as a positive outcome, because then at least net migration figures do not rise.

A Reunite Families UK survey also found that the rules have a profound effect on children, with 92% of respondents saying that their child's mental health had been affected. The separation that many families are forced into exacerbates such problems, putting even more pressure on the single parent. Parents report that younger children often cannot understand why the family have been separated, while older children who do understand the system become anxious for their missing parent. It could be said that those children are growing up in a society that implicitly tells them that their family are not welcome here.

Compared with those of other countries, this family visa policy appears to be unusually strict. The Migrant Integration Policy Index, which measures immigration policies in 52 countries, including all EU member states and OECD countries, ranks the UK second to bottom for family reunification policies. Many countries with strong immigration policies do not have such a high minimum income requirement for family visas. For example, Australia has no earnings threshold for family visas, and Spain and the Netherlands require yearly income to equal annual social security payments. That highlights that our current system is not the only option.

In overall numbers, the percentage of family visas in proportion to other entry visas has remained low and stable at around 5%, as the Migration Observatory's research found last year. Additionally, the Home Office's December 2023 policy paper, "Legal migration statement: estimated immigration impacts", was unable to predict the exact percentage of family visas that would be affected by the change, stating only that it

"may have an impact on the number of family migrants deterred in the low tens of thousands."

The Government have stated that there will be no further changes until the new Migration Advisory Committee review is complete, which is expected to be

in June. I hope that I have outlined the complexities in this area and highlighted that other options could be considered for the family visa that would allow the Government to control net migration while still allowing the average British citizen to marry and live with the person they love. I look forward to hearing the contributions of other hon. Members and the Government response.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mark Pritchard (in the Chair):** Order. I welcome the children to the Gallery—I think this is the first time that I have seen children here. The Chair is neutral in the debate, but you are all very welcome.

Right hon. and hon. Members should bob, as some of you are doing, even if you are on the speaking list, so that the Clerks have your name. At the moment, there is no time limit, but I hope that hon. Members will bear one another in mind when speaking.

4.49 pm

**Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for opening the debate, and Shannon for starting the petition. I am grateful to be able to speak here, on behalf of the hundreds of my constituents who signed this petition, to highlight the negative impacts of the previous Government's policy to increase income requirements for family visas. Those negative impacts have been present since the inception of this income requirement, but were made substantially worse by the increase.

We are talking about a tax on love: an ugly policy that fundamentally discriminates against migrants' families and implies that love, and family reunification, is a privilege that people must earn enough to afford. Just last week, I was contacted by a constituent who was forced to choose between being separated from his wife and moving to her home country of Taiwan. I will quote what he wrote to me after deciding to leave:

"Now in the UK we judge people by their country of origin and the content of their wallet... If you have money then you are welcome here, if you don't, then don't you dare fall in love with someone foreign."

Is that really the country we want to be? As we have just heard, around half of UK employees earn less than the current income requirement of £29,000 a year, and as job offers and prospective earnings for the non-UK citizens are not included, meeting that requirement is made even more difficult for many couples from overseas who just want to be together. That is not to mention the regional inequality factor, as average salaries differ throughout the UK, so a person's ability to love who they love may also depend on where in the UK they live and work.

I do appreciate and welcome the Government commissioning the Migration Advisory Committee to review this horrible rule, but I note with disappointment that in the meantime the income requirement remains in place. It is clear that the intention of this policy was not to benefit UK society, or even the economy; it is simply a cruel attempt to appear tough on migration. In fact, this policy harms society and public finances. There are cases where enforced separation has caused UK citizens to be reliant on state benefits, which they

[Carla Denyer]

would not be if their partners were allowed to live with them. There are also often costs on the NHS and social services, as the trauma of families being forced and torn apart causes long-lasting mental health issues.

Children in affected families are often aware of this policy and feel its impacts deeply. They report feeling sadness, loneliness and guilt, with some explaining that they struggle to sleep or to focus at school. Often, children are aware of the financial strain caused by this rule, and some kids told Reunite Families UK that they were trying to earn money themselves to help with costs. The impact of this policy on children and young people can last a lifetime, affecting their mental health, financial stability and sense of belonging. I wonder why! As RFUK told the Migration Advisory Committee, this has long-term impacts on people's integration into society and their economic performance.

I reiterate that this is a cruel and nasty policy. It fundamentally discriminates against people based on who they love and how much money they make. It is unjust and it undermines its own purposes, sending an offensive message to families and their children. I urge the Government to get rid of it without delay.

4.53 pm

**Dr Simon Opher** (Stroud) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing this debate. I would also like to thank the more than 300 petitioners from Stroud who have made this debate possible, and the Petitions Committee for allocating parliamentary time to this crucial debate.

As we have heard, the previous Conservative Government hiked the minimum income requirement to £29,000, and were seeking to raise it even further, to £38,000, all under the guise of controlling immigration. That does not seem to have worked, but let us be clear about this policy and what it has actually achieved: it has torn families apart and inflicted hardship on ordinary people. So I welcomed my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary commissioning the Migration Advisory Committee to conduct a review of this area as soon as we entered government.

In November, I, with 25 of my colleagues, wrote to the Migration Advisory Committee calling for the family visa income requirement to be lowered to the equivalent of the full-time national living wage. That adjustment would enable thousands of families to reunite, while still supporting financial stability; it would be a compassionate shift away from the previous Government's harsh stance. I am hopeful that the committee will come to the same conclusion.

Some people have sought to misrepresent the truth about this matter when discussing immigration. It is our duty to bring the facts to this debate. In 2024, the UK issued 3.4 million visas; 87,000 were family visas, which accounted for 7%, and the spousal visas made up even less—less than 5%. Moreover, the narrative that foreign spouses are a burden to taxpayers is fundamentally misleading. The Home Office's own guidelines explicitly state that foreign spouses have no recourse to public funds. In fact, they contribute through taxation, national insurance and an annual immigration health surcharge of £1,035.

I also worry that the cost of enforcing this policy is greater than the financial benefits. As we have heard, families forced into single-parent situations often require more Government support. As a GP, I have been seeing a patient and their family; the children are suffering because they cannot live with both parents, which has caused a lot of mental health difficulties. This policy is not only inhumane, but economically flawed.

This debate is not just about numbers on a spreadsheet and arbitrary thresholds; it is about real human lives and love, and the human cost is immeasurable. I will highlight the case of one of my constituents, Rebecca Gray, who played a pivotal role in securing the debate by rallying her social media followers to help to get this petition over the 100,000-signature line.

In 2023, Rebecca and her husband married in Turkey and began the spouse visa application process, knowing they had to meet a savings requirement of £88,500. To achieve that, they both worked 18 hours a day, seven days a week, while living in a high-risk earthquake zone in Turkey. Despite losing 250 extended family members in the February 2023 earthquake, Rebecca persevered, but because of the UK's rigid financial rules, they remain separated, with no certainty about when they can reunite. The cost of applying for a spouse visa is now a staggering £14,256 and increasing regularly. Rebecca is essentially exiled from her own country because she does not meet an arbitrary financial threshold.

Rebecca's case highlights further issues with the present policy. Rebecca is having to go through the cash savings route, which means she must hold £88,500 in savings. The average 25 to 34-year-old in the UK holds about £3,500 in savings. That just goes to show that the £88,000 figure is absolutely ludicrous.

The current policy means that family reunification is a luxury; as we have heard, it is only for the very richest. The £29,000 minimum income threshold is already the highest in the world, and 75% of applicants would not be able to meet the even greater figure of £38,700 proposed by the previous Government. It is deeply unjust that many British citizens working in our NHS, our police forces and other key public services now earn too little to live with their spouse in the UK. This is a matter of basic fairness. Families belong together. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister, when the review is published, to commit to a policy that will keep families together.

4.58 pm

**Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for opening this important debate and the petitioners for succeeding in bringing the debate to the House today.

It is remarkable to be here in Westminster Hall and find such unanimity among Members from both sides of the Chamber—indeed, from all parties, it would appear. The current income requirement for family visas simply means that, in my constituency, social care positions go unfilled, the NHS struggles without the necessary workforce, and care packages are in some instances impossible to deliver, even though the funding is there. The additional money for the NHS and the overall Scottish budget is of course welcome, but money alone will not solve our problems. I remind hon. Members that the previous

minimum salary threshold, before April 2024, was £18,600, so the increase brought in by the previous Government represents a significant increase in that requirement.

As has been said, would-be migrant workers are also hit by other rules, such as the extraordinary fees and the up-front health charges that provide yet another brutal barrier. It is not as though the Government's stated intention of training local people to fill labour shortages has any hope of success. We are at virtually full employment in my constituency, but there are shortages in health and social care, in the farming and fishing sectors and in hospitality and tourism. Those are vital issues in my constituency, and I think the hon. Members for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) would agree. This utterly unacceptable position is a betrayal, and it shows how vindictive the Tories were in their ill-fated and crude attempts to control migration numbers in the post-Brexit world. Remember, if we were still in the single market, we would not have this issue with the free movement of people.

Scotland is already suffering as a result of Westminster's Brexit and migration policies, and the old Tory and now new Labour proposals will inevitably undermine our public services. It is interesting to note that the current leader of the Labour party in Scotland claims that he is in discussion with the Westminster Government about a bespoke Scottish visa; I welcome clarification from the Minister in her speech if that is the case. As a former colleague, Stuart McDonald, so eloquently put it last April:

"The Government are basically saying to many of our children and to future generations, 'You can fall in love with whoever you wish, but if you want to marry a non-UK national and you are not earning whatever arbitrary sum we decide, you will need to go and live somewhere else. You can have the love of your life. You can have your country and the right to live here. But you can't have both.' That is just not normal."—[*Official Report*, 23 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 223WH.]

International students and academics make a contribution in excess of £5 billion annually to the Scottish economy. If the Government recognise the contribution of international students and academics, why would they defend this inherited policy that threatens to prevent future cohorts from making a similar contribution?

The SNP stands totally opposed to the current measures, never mind the increases or any potential increases. This is our motivation—and, it would appear, the motivation of the leader of the Scottish Labour party—for asking for devolved powers in this area. We have voted against these measures in the past, and we continue to call for immigration powers to be devolved to Scotland. I say again, for the avoidance of doubt, that money alone will not fix our problems. If the Labour Government want to reset our relationship with the European Union, here is one of the key areas to consider. We do not need simply to resist any increase in the earnings threshold; we need to bring it down.

Can the Minister defend the current salary threshold and explain its logic, given that she inherited this figure? I for one—as well as other Members and the wider public, I am certain, some of whom are watching this debate—would like to know the evidence on which it is based.

5.3 pm

**Abtissam Mohamed** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) on her excellent speech. She, along with other Members present, has raised many important points. I also thank Reunite Families UK and the families we have with us today. This issue is of great importance to my constituents, and I previously worked in this area when I was a lawyer.

I will start by asking: why the £29,000 figure? That question has come up many times from my constituents. The previous Government suggested that the new threshold would prevent families from becoming a burden to the taxpayer. They did not define what a burden was, although presumably it has something to do with access to public funds. However, those who come to the UK on a spouse visa do not have access to public funds and must pay the immigration health surcharge, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned. Assuming the previous Government were referring to recourse to public funds, a couple with no children with an income of around £22,000 and eligible for £500 of housing costs would not be entitled to universal credit, so why the £29,000 figure?

In response to a petition, the previous Home Secretary made it clear that their intention was to bring the minimum income requirement in line with the minimum salary threshold for a skilled worker, with no reason or rationale for why that threshold was chosen. Leaving aside the fact that the UK financial requirement is among the highest in the world, as Members have said, 50% of UK employees earn less than that threshold. Most jobs at entry level in many industries start at the minimum wage. The minimum wage at 35 hours a week is roughly £20,000 a year, and that should be the benchmark for the minimum income requirement. It is not clear why low-income workers are being denied family reunification. As colleagues have said, are they not allowed to fall in love? Is that purely for higher earners and the wealthy? The fact that half of UK employees would be excluded by the rules demonstrates that the policy is discriminatory and disregards the fundamental human right to family reunification.

I have been given consent to share a story, but the name of the individual has been changed to give her anonymity. Sarah worked full time in the hospitality sector, and had done so for the last eight years. She raised her children, aged nine and 11, as a single mother, and she relied on her mother to help with pick-up and drop off at school. Sarah's salary was £21,000. She went on holiday with her children and fell in love with a man while she was there. She could not uproot her children from school, and it was not viable to leave all of her family in the UK. While her income was already above minimum wage, it was not enough, so she considered different options. She did not have enough savings—she would have required £33,000—so she needed to get another part-time job, which would mean an extra 13 hours a week at minimum wage.

Sarah started to look for evening and weekend work, with the agreement that her mother would look after her children. She needed the two jobs, and she was happy to sacrifice her time with her children to ensure that she met the requirements. She got the job, but sadly her mother passed away, so she was left stranded with no childcare and no means of earning the extra income.

[*Abtisam Mohamed*]

Let us be clear that the real reason for introducing the minimum income requirement for spouse visas was the hostile environment policy. Over the past few years, successive representatives from the Tory Government have engaged in rhetoric and developed policies laced with xenophobic, populist appeal. Phrases such as “taking back control” and “hostile environment” have created an atmosphere of resentment towards migrants. Those phrases have been used to scapegoat migrants, painting them as a threat to national identity and economic stability.

There is also an intersectional element, as the policy discriminates in terms of wealth, location, age, gender and ethnicity. It affects women more than men, and it definitely affects younger people more. In 2017, the Supreme Court recognised that sponsors who were female or from certain ethnic minority groups are disproportionately affected by the minimum income requirement.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said, we are only talking about 5% of the migration figures, but I want to stress how important it is that we get this right, as it affects people’s lives. People cannot and do not control who they fall in love with, and our policies must reflect that. Our policies should be fair, non-discriminatory and based on a proper rationale.

**Imran Hussain:** The hon. Lady is an expert and she makes a powerful case. A point that has not been raised is about the further complications caused by delays and bureaucracy at the Home Office. In an example from the hundreds of cases I deal with, somebody provided his wage slips, but there was a discrepancy of pennies between the money that went into his bank account and his wage slip, so the case was refused. I know that the Minister is rightly interested in this area, and I hope that she will be able to address that point. Does the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (*Abtisam Mohamed*) agree that we need to address the bureaucracy, delay and complications at the Home Office?

**Abtisam Mohamed:** I agree with the hon. Member that many cases have been delayed as a result of incompetence and staff not being trained properly. The constant churn in the Home Office has meant that people are just treated as numbers and not as real human beings who have families who need to be reunited.

People cannot control who they do or do not fall in love with. Our policies should be fair, and currently they are not. They should not be discriminatory. They should be based on a proper rationale, not plucked out of thin air. Colleagues have made excellent points about bringing the income threshold in line with minimum wage—that should be the lowest benchmark—so that regardless of their income, people should meet the threshold.

I said earlier that 50% of employees do not meet the income requirement. We should do everything we can to ensure that everyone who is in work and paid the minimum wage is able to meet the requirements.

5.10 pm

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (*Irene Campbell*) for opening the debate.

I have a speech written, but it is always interesting just to speak my mind. Prior to my election as Member of Parliament, when I was a councillor I had hundreds of constituents contact me about the relative increase to an income of £29,000. Many constituents were concerned that they could not bring their spouses to the UK because they would not meet the threshold, and many were having to work more than one job. As hon. Members have rightly said, people working in certain sectors would simply not be able to meet the threshold.

Apart from that, there is a disparity when we look at where people are earning. Incomes in London are substantially greater than in the rest of the country, but that in itself is unfair because we all know that expenses in bigger cities are far greater. Someone earning £30,000 in Birmingham would be able to retain, say, £15,000, whereas someone earning £40,000 in London may only be able to retain £5,000 as a contribution towards the spouse and the marriage working out in the UK.

There is an enormous disparity but, let us face it, this is not about having a spouse or a family to provide for. If it were, the Government would be at real odds. If it is about affordability, what do we pay a couple in the UK over the age of 25? I think it is about £600 a month. Obviously there are housing costs associated too, but there is simply no comparison.

This policy was driven by the last Government to feed into the narrative that they were doing something about immigration. They were going to curtail the amount of people coming in, and the one way they could do that was to increase the threshold. That argument does not succeed either, however, because people who are wealthier or have assets can still marry and bring their spouses into the UK. This policy would harshly affect countless British citizens who have chosen to marry partners from abroad.

Stats from the Office for National Statistics clearly identify that the median annual salary in the UK falls well below the benchmark, so this will be impossible. People will have to choose between living with their loved ones in the UK or leaving the country. They may find themselves in the very difficult position of having to leave family, work and so on, to go to a country where they cannot get a job or do not have the skills or experience to take on employment. There are enormous difficulties.

This proposal is a punitive measure against those who have committed no crime other than falling in love. We know that love has no borders, especially in a world of social media. So many young people go on to social media because it is a global environment where people fall in love all the time. This policy will impact so many people. The Home Office, which is tasked with protecting and supporting our citizens, should not be placing barriers between family members; it should support and facilitate their union.

In seeking to protect the integrity of our borders, we must not lose sight of the integrity of our family values. I urge the Government to reconsider these draconian measures, remember their duty to the people they serve, and ensure that policy reflects both economic reality and the enduring importance of family unity. Let us not punish our citizens for their choice of partners; instead, let us support them in building their family lives, regardless of nationality.

5.15 pm

**Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) on her very capable speech introducing the debate.

I speak today in recognition of the strength of the representations that I have received from constituents; I thank all those who took the time to write to me ahead of this debate. I accept—as, I think, all my constituents do—that all Governments face the challenge of striking the right balance between a fair and rules-based immigration system and the human right to respect for family life, but we are here today because the 2012 system does not strike the right balance. The results can be arbitrary, unfair and distressing for families.

As has been said, family life and love cannot be neatly divided by borders. The House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee report said that the family visa system can be “complex and inconsistent”, and drew attention to the processing delays and decisions that are sometimes very hard for constituents to understand, as other hon. Members have ably highlighted.

There are a number of examples of unfairness in the policies and practices that this Government have inherited. The inflexibility of the cut-off takes no account of variations in earnings across the country. There is affluence in my constituency, but by and large wages are low and we have not fully recovered from the closure of the Longbridge plant 20 years ago. In a ranking of all constituencies by average income, Birmingham Northfield is 35th from the bottom.

In my constituency, the average full-time employee’s salary is about £31,000, but that does not take account of the self-employed, whose earnings tend to be lower. That figure is almost £3,000 lower than in Birmingham as a whole, almost £4,000 lower than in the west midlands overall and more than £6,000, or 16%, lower than the average for the UK. More than half of people in work are below the current threshold, and that would rise to more than 70% under the former Government’s plans.

The £29,000 threshold is already an extremely challenging barrier for many families to meet because the jobs are just not available. I have constituents who work two or more jobs in an effort to meet that threshold, at great personal cost. There is a clear risk that if the inherited plans proceed, the right to respect for family life will become the preserve of a fortunate few, concentrated in just a few neighbourhoods within the city of Birmingham.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) made the point well: the previous Government confused income with skill. It has been the stated ambition of successive Governments to attract highly skilled migrant workers. Two of the constituents who contacted me today hold doctorates, including in shortage occupation areas, but, due to a combination of altruism in their choice of career and family circumstances, they do not have large incomes. One of them, Dr Gillian Thies, is in the Public Gallery. She fought for years for her husband, Patrick, who is also with us, and their children to be allowed to join the rest of the family in Birmingham. The applications were initially refused and were granted only in 2018, after significant political and press attention.

Patrick is now a senior physician associate at the Royal Orthopaedic hospital, and his application was strongly supported by the NHS. Indeed, his work in the UK is of ongoing benefit to patients and the wider community, but Gillian and he had to fight to bring their children to the UK from America; distressingly, their adopted children—two young teenagers—were turned around and put on a plane at Heathrow. They are now heavily involved in the Reunite Families UK campaign. I want to place on the record an appreciation of how they have responded to their ordeal: by working to benefit others who find themselves in comparable situations today.

Gillian and Patrick are not alone in Northfield. Another of my constituents estimates that he has spent £50,000 to try to resolve his wife’s case, which he says is an exceptionally generous subsidy to airlines, hotels and lawyers. Would it not be better for the economy if that money could be spent in south Birmingham instead?

I welcome the Government’s decision to ask the Migration Advisory Committee to look again at this policy. I hope that the review, and the Government’s response to it, will take account of the House of Lords Committee’s recommendation that the financial requirement should be revisited to become more flexible and to focus on the likelihood of the future income of the family unit, rather than solely on the sponsor’s past income. The review should also take wider account of a family’s whole circumstances and of the differences in labour markets and local wages, and focus on improving the administration of applications so that fewer families are left in limbo for so long and the system is ultimately fairer and more compassionate.

5.21 pm

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I extend my thanks to the petitioners, those who have organised the petition, Reunite Families UK and the Petitions Committee for facilitating this very important debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for opening it. I congratulate her on setting out the arguments and issues in a most comprehensive and understandable fashion. I want to highlight a particular case that affects my constituent, but first I want to say a few general words to supplement and complement the existing contributions, which have all been absolutely excellent.

The sharp increase in the minimum income requirement for family visas is not an ill-judged policy; it is a cruel and discriminatory policy. It makes it painfully difficult for many British citizens to live and work in the UK with their foreign-born spouses, causing completely unnecessary emotional suffering and economic strain on families. Since the policy was last debated, a plethora of evidence has highlighted its disproportionate impact on women, single mothers and those working in relatively low-wage regional economies outside London.

When the previous shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock), raised concerns about the lack of justification for the dramatic minimum income requirement increase from £18,600 to £29,000, it became clear that the decision was not grounded in evidence, but seemed to be, in the words of my hon. Friend,

“plucked out of thin air”. —[*Official Report*, 23 April 2024; Vol. 748, c. 237WH.]

**Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): Would my hon. Friend agree that an underlying problem is not only the size of the proposed increase, but the arbitrary nature of the level? As has been mentioned, perhaps it is linked to the skilled workers level, but that seems to be an arbitrary figure as well. Would he agree that we need to ensure that people out there have faith in the system by ensuring that the levels at which it is set are not arbitrary?

**Grahame Morris:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention; he is absolutely correct. Although I am pleased and delighted that the Government have commissioned a Migration Advisory Committee review, which represents a step forward towards evidence-based policy making, the harm caused in the meantime cannot be ignored. The review is due in June, but in the interim thousands of families are still separated.

The policy disproportionately affects many groups, including, as I have said, women and single parents—often mothers with caring responsibilities, particularly those outside London and the south-east, which is a particular concern. It affects regions where wages are low, such as in Wales and Scotland. In regions such as the north-east, where median annual earnings are £15,000 lower than those in London, many hard-working families simply cannot meet the £29,000 per annum threshold. These regional disparities exacerbate existing inequalities and penalise those who simply do not earn as much. The Migration Observatory's 2023 research shows that 16% of British men working as employees do not earn enough to sponsor a spouse visa, but for women the figure skyrockets to 35%. That means that over a third of British women are currently ineligible to apply for a spousal visa should they need to do so.

I have permission to share the story of my constituent Lindsay Thompson, who contacted me last year. She has been married to her husband Orlando for six years. He still lives in Jamaica owing to the Home Office policy. He did not meet their son until the little boy was two years old because of the pandemic and travel bans, compounded by their inability to meet the mandatory visa threshold. Lindsay is a dedicated mother. She works tirelessly to provide for her son. She has applied for and secured multiple promotions at work and now only just earns £29,000 a year. She must sustain that income for six months before being eligible to apply for a visa. She lives in constant fear that the Government will raise the threshold even further to the £38,700 proposed by the Conservative party.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. Many of my Slough constituents have contacted me about this very issue. Many families simply want to be together in the UK to get on with their lives. I appreciate what my hon. Friend just said about the Government looking at the £29,000 threshold being looked into by the Migration Advisory Committee. Does he not agree that the hangover from the previous Conservative Government, who wanted to increase the threshold to an exorbitant £38,700 in early 2025, is extremely unfair, especially given that the UK average wage is way beneath that?

**Grahame Morris:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend reinforces previous comments and interventions. He is absolutely correct. That arbitrary threshold is worse for individuals

who live in relatively low wage economies such as my constituency and others. Within regions there are areas of low wages, too, as has been highlighted by other hon. Friends.

The emotional toll of the policy on parents and children is immense, with long-term impacts on mental health and wellbeing. We must recognise the policy's human cost. Families like Lindsay's deserve better. Everyone has the right to a family life, whether they live in London or Easington in County Durham. It is unacceptable that regional and gender disparities in pay continue to determine whether families can live together. The policy was conceived as a desperate attempt by the previous Conservative Government to reduce immigration. However, experts and campaigners consistently argue that raising the threshold has had a minimal impact on net migration figures. What it does succeed in doing is tearing families apart and inflicting unnecessary suffering.

When the MAC review is published, I urge the Minister to give full weight to the evidence of disproportionate harm caused by this policy, and to consider the voices of campaigners, charities and affected families, who have called for a compassionate approach to immigration policy. I politely remind her that this is a Tory legacy policy that can be reversed if there is the political will, so let us ensure that no family is left behind, and that our policies reflect fairness and respect the right to family life.

5.30 pm

**Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, for my first contribution to a Westminster Hall debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) on introducing this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and congratulate Shannon on bringing the petition forward.

I want to highlight the difficulty that various sectors are having in attracting and retaining workers, the risk that increasing the income requirement places on those sectors, the situation it puts families in, and the importance of accessible family visas for attracting people to the country. Young, happy, united and economically productive families are the building blocks of what we should define as a good economy.

First, I welcome the Government's quick decision to hold off on further increases to the minimum income requirement and to allow the Migration Advisory Committee to assess the impact of the requirement. We should be led by evidence and proper process, not forced into knee-jerk reactions to the broken migration system, which is still reeling from the hammer blow of the Tories' botched Brexit deal and other factors.

The current system punishes those on lower and middle incomes who have done nothing except fall in love with somebody from another country. That not only affects families but risks exacerbating employment and skills challenges across the economy. In fairness, when the initial decision to introduce a minimum income requirement was made in 2012, there was a public consultation and detailed analysis by the MAC, but no such analysis was done when the most recent changes were implemented, leaving the full economic effects unclear.

We know, however, that there are workforce shortages across all our constituencies in industries as diverse as housekeeping, hospitality management, bricklaying,

carpentry, plumbing, manufacturing and data analysis—to name a few that have approached me as their constituency MP. According to the Fraser of Allander Institute up the road, one in four employers reported unfilled vacancies last year.

It is also important to note that the skilled worker visa eligible occupations list does not cover all the areas facing worker shortages or all the sectors under pressure. A quick look at one recruitment website through which many young people trawl regularly—though I admit I have not done so since June—shows that jobs paying below £29,000 constitute a significant proportion of the work in those industries facing staff shortages. Raising the threshold to £38,700 would substantially exacerbate that.

It is difficult to see how the increase in the income requirement would not deter people from making the UK their home. In my experience of working in hospitality, workers from abroad were often of immense value to that part of the economy, especially in providing longevity to businesses that often deal with a high staff turnover.

A system that denies that ability to long-term partners also means that children often have to deal with one parent in the UK and one permanently abroad. Not only is that incredibly challenging personally for the child, but it limits opportunities, with a parent being forced to raise their child in a single-parent household without the support of their partner who is abroad. That places unnecessary financial and emotional pressure on them, at a time when we should be supporting everyone in our community to live and work well.

My final point is about the importance of attracting people to live in the United Kingdom. When family reunification is made so difficult for people on low and middle incomes, it sends the message that they are not welcome. I know from my inbox how hard the process can be. One constituent has been waiting for six years to obtain a visa for their spouse, and they commented that they were left exasperated by an uncontactable and uncommunicative Home Office. Six years: I can only imagine if that were my spouse, brother, son, nephew, niece or friend. We are deterring young and happy families under the Tories' previous policies.

That negative sentiment is reflected in the fact that the Migration Integration Policy Index ranks the UK as second to bottom of 56 countries for ease of family reunification, which should be a gauntlet for us to pick up and improve on. Alongside the tricky business—I acknowledge that it is tricky—of balancing migration policy, we should welcome families who are ready to contribute to our society and build their lives here.

In summary, any further increases to the minimum income requirement for family visas would worsen skills shortages in vital industries such as hospitality, construction and healthcare, while also making it more difficult for families to stay united. The Government's recent decision to hold off on further increases is a welcome step, and I urge them to consider the economic impact of the changes and the disruption that they would cause to families, workers and businesses when making any future decisions.

5.35 pm

**Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I start by acknowledging the more than 100,000 people who have

signed this petition nationally, including almost 200 people in my constituency, and I particularly thank Shannon for starting it. They have come together to call for a fairer and more compassionate approach to family visas. This issue deeply affects families across our country and we must address it with care and urgency.

The Liberal Democrats believe that the immigration system should work for everyone. We want to make sure that it works for our country and for our economy while treating everyone with dignity and respect. That means that the current system must change because, sadly, the previous Conservative Government's changes to the income requirements for family visas fell far short of that goal.

The decision to raise the minimum income threshold for a sponsoring partner to £29,000 a year and to propose further increases to nearly £39,000 a year has rightly caused widespread fear and anxiety for families. We ought to feel concerned for them and the countless people who have been left feeling uncertain about their futures or forced to make impossible decisions about their lives.

More than 10 hon. Members have spoken in this debate. I have heard that the policy is a tax on love and that it rips families apart, but I have not heard anyone speak in favour of it—I am pleased to say—which shows that the system is broken and needs changing. We must acknowledge the humanity of the situation: those arbitrary thresholds fail to take into account the many families who simply cannot meet them through no fault of their own. They disproportionately affect women, people in lower paid but essential jobs, and those living outside London and the south-east, where wages are often lower.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): We have heard a lot about sector-specific issues, and about regional inequalities and inequalities of race and gender, but does my hon. Friend agree that there is also an issue for people with disabilities? My constituent is an armed forces veteran who now suffers from PTSD and a range of other disabilities that leave him able to work only part time, which would massively hamper his ability to hit any threshold. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to ensure that the system that works for everyone and gives back to the people who have served our country?

**Mr Forster**: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who highlights that the policy has an impact on disabled and vulnerable veterans. The Government must acknowledge that and take it into account as they change the system to ensure that they support those people. He makes a valid point in support of his constituents.

Given that no one has said that they support the current policy, why did the Conservative Government make that move to cause so much disparity and hurt? Putting the threshold so artificially high prevents British citizens on lower incomes sponsoring their foreign spouse or partner moving to the UK. It does not save money—it hurts our financial system and our economy—but it is there to make them look tough on immigration. Everyone can see through it. Roughly half of UK employees earn less than £29,000 a year, so I am disappointed and surprised that the Conservatives, who often say that they are the party of traditional family values, trashed our family values in this country by introducing this policy and breaking up families.

[Mr Forster]

The Government's own Migration Advisory Committee is now reviewing those financial requirements. Although we welcome the pause on further rises, families need certainty, and they need it now. We need to know that they will not be torn apart by policies that prioritise the system over compassion; we need to protect them. We must ask ourselves what kind of country we want to live in—one that values the bonds of family or one that tears those bonds apart based on arbitrary numbers and a statistical threshold picked out of thin air. Do we follow hard data or do we follow the love that our constituents feel for each other?

The Liberal Democrats are committed to reversing the unfair increases in income thresholds for family visas. Families should not have to live in fear of being separated. They deserve stability and the opportunity to build their lives together in the UK. I urge the Government to act swiftly, to halt any further increases and to ensure that family visa requirements are fair and proportionate. Families matter. No one should have to choose between their loved ones and their home.

5.40 pm

**Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell), the Petitions Committee and the 101,321 members of the public who have requested that we debate this topic. Those 100,000 people have asked us to discuss this policy because, as many hon. Members have movingly pointed out, it can be overwhelmingly important to those it affects. There are few things in life and in human nature more powerful than the desire to be with those you love. To be separated from your husband or wife by a national border is no small thing. Indeed, for those it is happening to it can feel like everything.

The role of Government is to determine what is right for the country, not for any one person, couple or family, so we must place this discussion in its national context: managing overall migration to Britain. The public have consistently asked successive Governments to lower migration. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) has said, the last Government, like Governments before them, promised to do exactly that, but, again like the Governments before them, did not deliver. Migration has been far too high for the last two decades and remains so.

The issue of migration is not just about quantity. It should be a fundamental principle of our system that people who come to this country do not cost more than they contribute; what they pay in tax should at least cover the costs of the public services that they use. The policy that we are debating was implemented by a Conservative Government as part of an attempt to cut migration and to ensure that those who come here do not represent a net fiscal cost. Clearly, it was not enough, but it was a step in the right direction.

In delaying reform, the new Government seem to be making the same mistakes as previous Governments. To refer again to the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex, we in Westminster

"cannot pretend that immigration comes only with benefits and no costs".

This is all too clear to the country. People can see it in their wages, which are stagnating because they are being undercut, and they can see it in their rent soaring, in how hard it is for their children to get on the housing ladder, in the cohesion of their communities and in the pressure on their GPs, dentists and infrastructure.

**Tom Gordon:** I am slightly surprised. The hon. Lady raised a number of points about her own Government's record and what they were unable to deliver, so does she not find it a little jarring that she is now preaching to this Government about what they should do?

**Katie Lam:** It is the job of the Opposition to hold the Government to account, whoever is in government. As I have acknowledged, these are mistakes that we made, so very few people are as well qualified to suggest what behaviour could be avoided in the future. That is part of our job and our duty to the public.

**Seamus Logan:** I appreciate the humane remarks that the hon. Lady made at the beginning of her speech, but is she not now guilty of continuing to slur migrant workers who come to this country as representing a net fiscal drain on the economy? These workers contribute to our economy, and they represent a contribution to its growth.

**Katie Lam:** It is far from a slur. I will come on to more statistical analysis of fiscal costs in a moment, but if a migrant to this country represents a fiscal cost, that is a fact, not an insult. This Labour Government, as we know, have also committed to lowering migration. We do not know by how much or when, so I would be grateful if the Minister could enlighten us on that.

The hon. Members for Stroud (Dr Opher) and for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) pointed out that spousal and partner visas accounted for only 5% of visas issued last year, but 58,000 people is still a huge number, and it is only our—to quote the Prime Minister—"sky-high" level of overall migration that makes it seem small. In fact, it is almost as much as the entire cumulative net migration to Britain for the 25 years leading up to 1997. In the past four years, more people have moved to the UK under a spousal visa than live in Exeter, Ipswich or Blackpool, and that number is rising sharply. There is some indication that, as the previous Government tightened the rules around dependants and salary thresholds for work visas, people turned to the family route instead. Numbers in the second quarter of 2024 were up a third on the same time in 2023 and were four times as high as in the second quarter of 2022.

It is worth remembering that any and every Briton can marry any foreign citizen who can get a visa here. This country has issued some 5 million visas in the past five years, so the system is hardly stringent. The question is not, "Should British citizens be able to bring their foreign spouses to the UK?" It is, "Does it benefit the country as a whole for British citizens on lower salaries to bring foreign spouses here who are unable to get a visa any other way?" By definition, those spouses fall outside the already excessively broad conditions that we have set for being able to come to this country in their own right. I hope it is some comfort to the constituent of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) to hear that there is no minimum income requirement if a spouse is disabled or on personal independence payment.

The hon. Members for Stroud, for Sheffield Central and for North Ayrshire and Arran reminded us that those coming here have no immediate right to welfare support. That implies that there are no costs to that migration, but that is wrong. After five years, a person who has come here on a family visa can apply for indefinite leave to remain. If they get it—95% of ILR applicants are successful—they qualify for welfare, social housing, NHS care and everything else, and that costs money. The salary threshold exists because people who move to this country—even those who are spouses of citizens—must be able to sustain themselves financially within their family, or the whole system will fall to pieces, even more than it already has.

**Ayoub Khan:** On the point about what a spouse costs the state in terms of public services, surely the income generated by the working spouse would mean that they are not entitled to receive benefits of any kind.

**Katie Lam:** As I just explained, if the person has been here for five years and applies for indefinite leave to remain, and it is granted—as almost all indefinite leave to remain applications are—they are entitled to full welfare, social housing, NHS care and everything else the state provides to its citizens.

That point about indefinite leave to remain is especially relevant to family visas. Ten years after arrival, only 7%, or one in 14, of those who come here on student visas, and 21%, or one in five, of those who came on work visas, have ILR. For family visas, it is 83%, or five out of every six people. That is why the Migration Advisory Committee's initial impact assessment of the policy found £500 million in welfare cost savings and £500 million more in public service savings from the introduction of the £18,000 minimum income requirement, and that was when far fewer people were using that route to come here.

But the cost-benefit analysis that counts is not that of the Migration Advisory Committee, but that of the British people. They want mass migration to end, and they are sick of broken promises. The numbers must come down across the whole system. The last Government were therefore right to introduce this reform, and it does not bode well that this Prime Minister, for all his talk, decided at the first opportunity to back out of it.

**Dr Opher:** Will the hon. Lady say whether the policy of punitively attacking families was successful in reducing migration? Will she also say what effect immigration has on GDP?

**Katie Lam:** As I have said, the policy was nothing like enough to reduce immigration. It was a step in the right direction, but it was deeply insufficient. Migration has the effect of increasing GDP in raw terms because more people are here but, on GDP per capita, most evidence indicates that it weakens our economy over the medium term.

On this reform and the many others required to our migration system, the Government must make difficult decisions. Those decisions may be painful, especially in the short term, for individual people, families or businesses, or the cost of the public service workforce. But that is the only way for any Government's actions to match their words. The public have had enough.

Can the Minister confirm that the Government remain fully committed to bringing down migration? Can she confirm exactly what that means, by how much they will bring down the numbers and when, and that the Government understand that it must happen—indeed, can only happen—where it involves making hard and upsetting choices for the good of our country? With that in mind, can the Minister confirm whether it is the Government's intention to maintain this policy? If they will not make that commitment today, can they at least commit to the fundamental principle behind it—that those who come here, or bring others here, should be able to support themselves financially and not represent a net cost to the state over the long term? Does the Minister therefore agree that the salary threshold should increase to whatever level is necessary to ensure that that is the case?

Finally, I am conscious that those who have been granted indefinite leave to remain are then able to sponsor a spouse. Can the Minister tell us how many migrants on skilled worker visas, care worker visas and shortage occupation lists—I believe that amounts to 2 million visas since the start of 2021—the Home Office expects to apply for ILR when eligible? How many spousal visa applications does the Department then expect to receive from those people? Further, based on demographic, level of income and number of dependants, what do the Government expect that to cost? What discussions are being held between the Home Secretary, the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions on how these pressures will be met?

5.51 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard. I thank all those from across the Chamber who have contributed to this important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for moving the motion on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I also thank Shannon who started the petition and the over 100,000 people who signed it. The petition was concluded before the general election, but it has been brought forward for debate in the House.

It is important to address the point raised by the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) about the delays in Home Office cases. That is a separate matter from the one we are discussing. However, I will say that we inherited a Home Office with utterly chaotic systems. The huge amount—£700 million—spent on the Rwanda scheme and the diversion of caseworkers have partly contributed to the chaos that we have seen across a number of visa routes. I hope that we are starting to bring that under some control, so that applications can be processed more swiftly and people are not left waiting as long as they have been.

It is also important to make the point that migration has always been a part of our nation's history. For generations, people have travelled here from all over the world to contribute to our economy, study in our universities, work in our public services and be part of our communities. Indeed, British citizens also continue to travel across the world and may choose to make their home abroad. We recognise and value the contribution that legal migration makes to our country, but as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Weald of Kent

[Seema Malhotra]

(Katie Lam), and all those across the House will be aware, we have said that net migration, which reached record highs under the last Government—over 900,000 in the year ending June 2023—is unsustainable. It needs to come down, and we have made that commitment. However, there has been a broader conversation in the contributions from Members across the House. I will endeavour to respond to the specific points raised, but first I want to set out the background to the minimum income requirement, or the MIR. I will set out how it came about and what our position is now.

As we know, appendix FM was brought into the immigration rules in 2012 to set out the requirements for family members wishing to come to or stay in the UK on the basis of their relationship with a family member who is British or settled here. It also brought the MIR into the immigration rules, with the aim of ensuring that family migrants could be supported at a reasonable level by their sponsoring family member so that, as has been raised, there was no unreasonable burden on the British taxpayer and to help to ensure that they had the independence and means to participate sufficiently in everyday life, to support themselves and to facilitate integration into Britain.

The right to family life is a qualified right, and the family immigration rules, including the MIR, carefully balance that right against the legitimate aim of protecting the economic wellbeing of the UK. Expecting family migrants and their sponsors to be financially independent is reasonable to both them and the taxpayer. In 2017, the Supreme Court agreed that this principle strikes a fair balance between the interests of those wishing to sponsor a partner to settle in the UK and the community in general.

When the MIR was introduced as part of the changes to the immigration rules, it was set at £18,600, following advice from the Migration Advisory Committee. At that time, the figure represented the level of income that a family could receive at which point they would cease to be eligible for income support. Between its introduction and April 2024, it was not increased in line with inflation or real wages or adjusted in the light of rising numbers of migrants using the route. The previous Government then decided to raise the MIR to bring it in line with the median income for skilled workers, which is currently £38,700. The decision was made without consultation and without the benefit of advice from the Migration Advisory Committee.

Shortly afterwards, the Conservative Government decided to implement the rise incrementally. The first increase, to £29,000, took place in April 2024, and no further changes have yet taken place. It is our view that any change must be underpinned by a solid evidence base and form part of a system that is fair, clear and consistent. To achieve that, as has been mentioned, the Home Secretary has commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to review the financial requirements in the family immigration rules. That includes the level of the MIR and how it can be met.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): A number of Members have raised concerns about the discrepancies in incomes and average earnings across different regions

and nations of the UK. Can the Minister give us an assurance that the Migration Advisory Committee will look at those?

**Seema Malhotra:** Indeed, that is what we would expect.

The Migration Advisory Committee has already completed a call for evidence. It may be of interest to the House that that call for evidence, which gathered the views of stakeholders and those affected by changes to family rules and closed on 11 December, saw more than 2,000 responses—a record for a Migration Advisory Committee consultation. The comments received will inform the review being conducted by the Migration Advisory Committee. I am sure that many interested Members and their constituents will have taken part in that opportunity to provide views, because, as has been mentioned, a rich evidence base is essential to ensure that effective recommendations can be made.

The Migration Advisory Committee has also commissioned two pieces of research to independent research contractors: a survey with a sample of applicants to the family visa, and qualitative reviews with people who applied and those who were not able to apply. Fieldwork will start in the next few weeks, and further information can be found on gov.uk. The Migration Advisory Committee is an independent body, and I know that the review will be robust and transparent, considering the impact on family life, children, equalities and regional variations in income. It is expected that the MAC will issue its report in the summer, and we will carefully consider its recommendations before making any further changes.

I will address a few of the points raised by hon. Members from across the House. Some hon. Members called for us to scrap the MIR altogether. However, as I said, it is a long-established principle that family life in the UK must be on a basis that balances the needs of the family and those of the UK taxpayer, and that also enables family migrants to integrate into British life. The family immigration rules are flexible and contain safeguards to protect the right to family life.

It is worth highlighting a few of the safeguards that are currently in the rules, because that will inform some of the hon. Members who made contributions today. Those who cannot meet the core requirements of the rules, including the MIR, may still be granted leave if they have exceptional circumstances that mean refusing their application would be unjustifiably harsh. That takes into account the impact on children and considers their best interests. It is in accordance with our obligations under article 8 of the European convention on human rights. Where someone is granted leave on the basis of exceptional circumstances, they are placed on a longer, 10-year route to settlement, which is granted in four tranches of 30-month periods, with a fifth application for indefinite leave to remain.

The rules recognise that some sponsors will have reduced earning capacity as a result of disability or caring for someone with a disability. Therefore, an applicant whose sponsor is in receipt of certain specified disability-related benefits or allowances is exempt from meeting the MIR. Instead, they must meet a requirement for adequate maintenance, demonstrating that they can support themselves and their family without relying on public funds.

**Tom Gordon:** The Conservative spokesperson, the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), mentioned the point about personal independence payments. Obviously, not everybody who has a disability is eligible for every benefit; there are certain thresholds and requirements in order to get those statuses, and the conditions of people with disabilities might vary and change. How does that factor into what the Minister is saying?

**Seema Malhotra:** I am sure that those issues will have been raised in the responses that have come to the Migration Advisory Committee. It is right that the MAC is reviewing how the current financial requirements are operating, including looking at the impact on family units. It is important to mention that both the immigration fees and the immigration health surcharge may be waived based on what the applicant can afford.

I will briefly mention those who work for His Majesty's armed forces in relation to the immigration rules. I note that the previous Government laid immigration rules in March 2024 that brought the MIR for His Majesty's armed forces, including the Brigade of Gurkhas and the Royal Air Force partner route, in line with the armed forces salary threshold on completion of training, which was £23,496 for the 2023-24 financial year. That no longer includes an additional income requirement to sponsor a child. Tethering the MIR to the armed forces salary threshold takes into account the unique nature of their service, the armed forces covenant and the recruitment and retention of the armed forces in order to maintain national security.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

**Seema Malhotra:** I do not think that the hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber at the start of the debate.

**Mark Pritchard (in the Chair):** Order. The hon. Gentleman came in quite late.

**Seema Malhotra:** As always, the hon. Gentleman is welcome to catch me after the debate.

In relation to impact assessments, the previous Government published some initial analysis, which was referenced in the debate, on the volume impacts of the first stage of the minimum income requirement increase in December 2023, when the decision was announced. They committed to publishing the full analysis in the impact assessment, but that was not done when the rules changed or when the general election took place.

Impact assessments are important to enable scrutiny of the impact of the increase of the MIR. That is why we published the regulatory and equalities impact assessments for net migration measures under the previous Government in September and paused any further increases while the Migration Advisory Committee reviews the financial requirements in the family immigration rules. Once the MAC report has been received, a further equalities impact assessment will be completed to inform any further changes that are made.

To conclude, I thank hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. The Government's position is clear: we support the right to family life and value the contribution that those from overseas make to our economy,

public services and civic life. We recognise that that needs to be balanced as part of a fair, managed and controlled migration system.

**Seamus Logan:** The hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), speaking for the Opposition, described the public's perception of these rules as being of great concern, as if there were a homogeneous view across the country. We know that is not the case: there is a different view in Scotland. During my speech I asked the Minister to confirm whether the leader of the Labour party in Scotland was in discussions with the Government regarding a bespoke Scottish visa. She has not answered that question yet, but I hope she will. Perhaps she can also confirm whether that might extend to partner visas as well.

**Seema Malhotra:** The hon. Member is right that views vary, but, in line with how the public see immigration, it is important that there should be a fair system that is controlled and well managed. It is extremely important for us to ensure we have controls around our system and not the utter chaos we saw under the last Government. Frankly, to say one thing and be doing almost the opposite is exactly what drives cynicism with politics and with control over immigration and our public services.

On the questions that the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) has raised, I should say that I am in contact with a number of Members of the Scottish Parliament and other colleagues in the Scottish Parliament. The hon. Member will know our position because it is his colleagues who have raised the issue there. We will not be devolving immigration policy, because the issues that Scotland faces are the same issues faced in other areas. They also relate to labour market issues, whether that be pay, controls or conditions. It is important that we understand the issues, which is why I will visit Scotland in the near future. It is important to hear at first hand from those around the country, as we must have an immigration system that works for all parts of the United Kingdom.

The migration system and the MIR is an important issue. I recognise the concerns raised by hon. Members on different sides today and in the many pieces of correspondence I have received on this topic from Members, many of whom are here today. We must understand the impact of any potential further changes and ensure that policy in this area has a firm evidence base. I look forward to receiving the Migration Advisory Committee's recommendations in the summer, which I am sure will inform the next steps we take and the debate in Parliament and across the country.

6.9 pm

**Irene Campbell:** This debate has shown how important it is that families affected by the policy have answers soon with regards to their future in the UK. We have already heard the consequences of the long waiting times on families, particularly their children. I am proud to have represented this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. First, I thank the staff on the Petitions Committee for their assistance and hard work in preparing for the debate. I thank all the groups whose work I have been able to cite in the debate, particularly Migration Observatory, Reunite Families UK and Citizens Advice for their guidance and extensive research. Many thanks once again to Shannon for starting the petition.

*[Irene Campbell]*

We have had the privilege of hearing from Members contributing to this debate with varying views and ideas. It is clear that this is an issue important to constituents and that the minimum income requirement has a profound effect on families all over the UK. Finally, I thank the Minister for her response and for giving this debate the time and care it deserves. We are all looking forward to the new Migration Advisory

Committee review this year and the guidance it will provide to the Government and all those affected by the minimum income requirement.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petition 652602 relating to the income requirement for family visas.

6.10 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

*Monday 20 January 2025*

## EDUCATION

### Higher Education Student Support

#### **The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):**

The Government announced on 4 November a significant package of measures to support students and stabilise the university sector.

We need to put our world-leading higher education sector on a secure footing in order to face the challenges of the next decade. Maximum fees for the 2025-26 academic year will increase by forecast inflation, 3.1%, providing additional financial help for higher education providers after seven years of frozen fees, which have resulted in their value falling by an estimated 28%.

The 3.1% increase to maximum fees for 2025-26 will help cement higher education providers' roles as engines of growth in the heart of communities across the country and will mean they can continue to deliver high-quality education that boosts the life chances of those who choose this path.

Maximum tuition fees for a standard full-time course and the subsidised up-front loans available to students to pay their tuition will be increased by 3.1% to £9,535 for a standard full-time course; to £11,440 for a full-time accelerated course and to £7,145 for a part-time course for the 2025-26 academic year.

The increase in maximum tuition fees for 2025-26 applies to new and continuing students; however, higher education providers are autonomous and responsible for setting their own fees up to the maximum amounts.

In deciding whether or not to increase fees, providers will want to ensure that they can continue to deliver courses which are fit for purpose and help students achieve their ambitions. For continuing students, providers will also depend on their individual contracts with students, and providers will wish to make their own legal assessment of contracts when considering fee increases.

From the start of the 2025-26 academic year, a lower maximum fee limit of £5,760 is being introduced for foundation years in classroom-based subjects. A lower tuition fee loan limit of £5,760 is also being introduced to match the new tuition fee limit. We recognise the important role that foundation years play in promoting access to higher education, but we believe they can be delivered more efficiently, at lower costs to students.

Students will receive additional support for their living costs in 2025-26, with the largest cash increases for students from low-income families. This approach ensures that the most support is targeted at the poorest students, while keeping the student finance system financially sustainable.

Maximum undergraduate loans for living costs will be increased by forecast inflation, 3.1%, in 2025-26 with as much as £414 additional support for students on the lowest incomes who need the most help.

I am also announcing today further changes to student support for the 2025-26 academic year that will benefit students.

Maximum disabled students' allowance for students with disabilities undertaking full-time and part-time undergraduate courses in 2025-26 will increase by 3.1%. Maximum grants for students with child or adult dependants who are attending full-time undergraduate courses will also increase by 3.1% in 2025-26.

We are also increasing support for students undertaking postgraduate courses in 2025-26.

Maximum loans for students starting master's degree and doctoral degree courses from 1 August 2025 onwards will be increased by 3.1% in 2025-26. The same increase will apply to the maximum disabled students' allowance for postgraduate students with disabilities in 2025-26.

Bereaved partners and children of Gurkhas and Hong Kong military veterans discharged before 1997 who have been granted indefinite leave to enter or indefinite leave to remain will not be subject to the three-year ordinary residence requirement but will instead need to be ordinarily resident in England on the course start date to qualify for student support and home fee status. This change is being introduced as these students may find it difficult to meet the normal ordinary residence requirements for student support and home fee status.

We will expect the higher education sector to demonstrate that, in return for the increased investment that we are asking students to make, they deliver the very best outcomes both for those students and for the country.

We have set out our five priorities for reform of the higher education system and will work in partnership with the sector over the coming months to shape the changes to Government policy that will be needed to support this reform. We will expect our higher education providers to:

Play a stronger role in expanding access and improving outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Make a stronger contribution to economic growth.

Play a greater civic role in their communities.

Raise the bar further on teaching standards, to maintain and improve our world-leading reputation and drive out poor practice.

Drive a sustained efficiency and reform programme.

We will then set out this Government's plan for higher education reform by this summer.

Looking forward to the 2026-27 academic year, the lifelong learning entitlement (LLE) will deliver transformational change to the current student finance system by broadening access to high-quality, flexible education and training. The LLE will launch in 2026-27 for courses starting from January 2027.

Further details of the student support package for 2025-26 are set out in the document "Higher Education Fees and Student Support for 2025-26: Details".

I have laid regulations implementing changes to maximum fees for undergraduates in 2025-26 on 20 January.

Alongside the regulations, we are publishing impact assessments on the changes to maximum fees for 2025-26 which draw on the Office for Students' independent analysis of the wider financial pressures facing the higher education sector as well as an equality impact assessment of changes to fees and student support for 2025-26.

I also plan to lay further regulations implementing changes to student support for undergraduates and postgraduates for 2025-26 in February. Regulations are subject to parliamentary procedure.

Attachments can be viewed online at:  
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2025-01-20/HCWS372/>

[HCWS372]

## ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

### Energy Company Obligation 4 and Great British Insulation Scheme

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** This statement will be made at a later date.

[HCWS373]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### eVisa Consultation Response

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra):** The transition to eVisas is a key element of our move to a digital, streamlined UK border and immigration system, replacing physical immigration documents with digital proof of immigration status.

Most physical biometric immigration documents (BIDs), in the form of biometric residence permits (BRPs), expired on 31 December 2024. We are encouraging all foreign national status holders to register for a UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) account to access their eVisa. This transition began with the EU settlement scheme and many foreign nationals now coming to the UK will already have an eVisa. The transition to digital BIDs (eVisas) needs to be reflected in the “Code of Practice about the sanctions for non-compliance with the biometric registration regulations”, which was last updated in 2015.

Holders of eVisas will be able to evidence their identity and status by creating a UKVI account “share-code” which they can provide to third parties, such as employers. At times, key account information such as facial images and name changes will need to be updated. Keeping this information up to date is a requirement set out in the Immigration (Biometric Registration) Regulations 2008. Failing to comply with these requirements may result in the Secretary of State imposing sanctions on the individual. These requirements and the way sanctions will operate are outlined in the code of practice.

We have revised the existing code of practice and consulted on the changes through a 12-week public consultation exercise between July and October 2023. This consultation included an online survey, two in-person engagement events and two virtual events. We also conducted a further round of engagement in November 2024 with a variety of stakeholders to ensure that the code of practice does not disproportionately impact vulnerable individuals and there are enough support mechanisms in place. Feedback from the consultation exercise and further engagement has been reflected in the revised code of practice. We are now ready to publish the Government’s response to the consultation. A copy of the consultation response and the revised code of practice will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk).

[HCWS370]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Rough Sleeping Winter Pressures Funding 2024-25

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** I am pleased to announce to the House that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has announced additional funding to local authorities to support people sleeping rough this winter.

On 6 November, I set out £10 million of rough sleeping winter pressures funding to local authorities across England. Today, my Department has increased this by a further £20 million.

The decision to provide additional funding underlines our commitment to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, and the significant pressures local authorities face. I have written to council leaders asking them to use this additional funding to safeguard people who are particularly vulnerable and at risk of sleeping rough this winter; and to encourage further join-up between councils and their local community and voluntary sector partnerships.

This £20 million allocation has been made available to 250 local authorities with the greatest rough sleeping pressures and across all London boroughs. The funding will support a range of services, including finding solutions for vulnerable people sleeping rough long term and supporting them with sustaining a life away from the streets. It will also continue to fund specialist support to vulnerable groups such as veterans, care leavers and victims of domestic abuse who are sleeping rough. Allocations will be published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk).

The Government are committed to getting us back on track to ending homelessness. This winter pressures funding for 2024-25 will enable local authorities to act to save lives.

[HCWS371]

# ORAL ANSWERS

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