

**Wednesday
22 January 2025**

**Volume 760
No. 79**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 22 January 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Strengthening the Union

1. **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen the Union. [902227]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): I am sure everyone across the House would like to join me in paying tribute to the late, great Denis Law. A hero to many Scots and particularly to football fans, the Lawman scored 30 international goals in 55 appearances for Scotland and is the only Scot to win the Ballon d'Or. We send our sincere condolences to his family, friends and former colleagues.

I also want to wish everyone a very happy Burns Day for Saturday. We celebrated with two fantastic events in the Scotland Office this week and I was pleased that so many Members from across the House were able to join us. I also want to register that it is Holocaust Memorial Day next week. On the 80th anniversary, we all reaffirm in this House that we will never, ever forget.

An economic plan for change will bring growth and economic opportunity to all parts of the country. I am proud that in the last six months we have brought Great British Energy to Scotland, secured the Commonwealth games in Glasgow, launched “Brand Scotland”, delivered a pay rise for hundreds of thousands of Scottish workers and increased the state pension through our commitment to the triple lock. We promised in our manifesto to end austerity, and with £4.9 billion extra for the Scottish Government, that promise is delivered.

Mr Barros-Curtis: I associate myself with my right hon. Friend's comments. Further to what he has just said, will he assure me that after 14 years of obstruction from the Conservative party, this UK Labour Government will work with our Scottish and Welsh colleagues to deliver the change that the country voted for, as part of a whole-UK approach?

Ian Murray: Unfortunately, the previous Government left office with living standards at their lowest level since the 1950s. In contrast, we are determined to deliver economic growth and raise living standards in every part of the United Kingdom so working people have more money in their pockets. I meet the Deputy First Minister regularly to go over joint issues for the two Governments to deliver for the people of Scotland.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Surely the best way for them to strengthen the Union is for the UK and Scottish Governments to work together on issues that need pressing attention, such as immigration and demography. Twenty years ago, there was a fresh start initiative. Today, the First Minister will launch his plans to get graduates from all over the world to come to Scotland. Will the Secretary of State encourage the Home Office to work with the Scottish Government to achieve that?

Ian Murray: We have reset the relationship with the Scottish Government. I think I spend more time with the Deputy First Minister than the hon. Gentleman does. I suspect he should spend more time with those on his own side discussing issues of interest to the Scottish people. We are determined to deliver, and we will do that in partnership. That is what resetting the relationship is all about.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): May I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for helping to secure £14 million of levelling up funds for the area of Drumchapel in my constituency of Glasgow West? Does he agree that given the record settlement that the Scottish Government have received from the UK Government, it is about time that they went ahead and sorted out the problems of under-provision and overcrowding in Drumchapel health centre?

Ian Murray: My hon. Friend has been a doughty champion for Drumchapel and was key, at the heart of this Labour Government, to getting that funding across the line. The health service in Scotland is in crisis, which is only made clearer by the First Minister taking personal control of it. One in six of our fellow Scots are on NHS waiting lists. The record settlement of £4.9 billion to end austerity in Scotland needs to be spent on the frontline in places such as Drumchapel health centre.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Secretary of State has spoken eloquently about his efforts to strengthen the Union between our nations. What, then, is he doing to fix the problems that the Windsor framework and the protocol are causing with importing seed and ware potatoes from Scotland into Northern Ireland? That is not strengthening our Union.

Ian Murray: This Government are fixing the foundations of our economy and resetting our relationships, not just with the devolved Administrations but with our partners across the European Union. I would hope that all parties would want to come together to make sure that happens.

Farming Industry

2. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on support for the farming industry in Scotland. [902228]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): The Secretary of State meets the Deputy First Minister on a regular basis and the inter-ministerial group for environment, food and rural affairs convenes regularly to discuss important issues, including

agriculture. I am personally looking forward to speaking at the National Farmers Union Scotland conference in February alongside Scottish Government Ministers.

We have been working hard to positively reset relations with the Scottish Government. The recent Budget saw Scotland receive an above-population share for agriculture, and ringfencing of the budget was removed to respect the devolution settlement.

Wendy Chamberlain: I look forward to hearing the Minister at the NUFSS dinner. What conversations has she had with the Scottish Government and the Treasury on the agricultural property relief reforms and their impact on tenant farmers? My understanding from answers to the questions I have asked is that they do not have the same opportunities to ameliorate the APR changes as others do, and it feels like that cohort has been completely forgotten by the Government. Can we urgently review that, if that is indeed the case?

Kirsty McNeill: These reforms still provide a very significant level of tax relief, with the first £1 million of combined business and agriculture assets continuing to receive 100% relief in most cases. Additional assets will still receive relief at a rate of 50%. The Budget was designed to protect the payrolls of working people while raising record funding for public services in Scotland. The hon. Lady should outline where she thinks that money should come from if she thinks that the wealthiest landowners should not be paying more tax.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Inheritance tax is a necessary tax. That view is tacitly shared by Conservative Members given that they did not lift a finger to abolish it when they were in power. Do Ministers agree that taxing the most valuable farm estates at half the rate that other inheritance tax payers pay is an essential step to enable record spending on sustainable farming and to deliver record high budget settlements for Scotland? If Opposition Members disagree, they should go back to their constituencies this weekend and explain what they would cut, rather than waiting until halfway through the fiscal year, as the Scottish Government are prone to do.

Kirsty McNeill: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Opposition Members have told us about how they want to see the benefits of the Budget, but they are not prepared to support any of the tax-raising measures in it. This Budget secured billions for Scotland, but the SNP voted against that. It delivered a pay rise for 200,000 of the lowest-paid Scots, but the SNP voted against that. It ended Tory austerity, and the SNP voted against that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): May I associate myself and the Official Opposition with the Secretary of State's comments regarding Denis Law, a proud son of Aberdeen who never forgot his home town? Indeed, his legacy lives on through the Denis Law Trust, which does such good work with young people in and around the city.

This Saturday, the National Farmers Union of Scotland is planning a national day of action in protest at the pernicious, ill thought through and destructive changes

to agricultural property relief and its threat to the future of family farms in Scotland. I will be attending the local rally in Aberdeenshire to show my and my party's support of our farmers. I notice that the Edinburgh rally is taking place but a few miles from the Secretary of State's own constituency in Ingleton. Does the Minister know whether he will be attending the rally?

Kirsty McNeill: We are in ongoing discussions with the National Farmers Union of Scotland. As I have said, I am proactively attending its conference next month. I am slightly surprised to hear the shadow Secretary of State talking about the changes in the Budget and not welcoming their announcement or, indeed, their implications, such as the International Monetary Fund and the OECD both predicting that Britain will be Europe's fastest-growing economy in the coming years. The UK is the only G7 economy, apart from the US, to have had its growth forecast upgraded by the IMF for this year. It has also gone ahead of Germany, China and India to become the second most attractive company for global investment, trailing only the US, according to PwC's annual survey. If he wants to talk about—

Mr Speaker: Minister, please! I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie: Of course we do not agree with the policy in the Budget; the policy is purely wrong. Farmers were not consulted on it. Indeed, they were misled by the Labour party when they were told that this would not happen. It will lead to the demise of the family farm and undermine our food security, as farmers will simply stop farming. The concern, worry and fear that these changes have wrought on Scotland's farmers are real and are on these Ministers and their Government. If the Secretary of State will not attend the rally this weekend, will he and the Minister at least use their position as Scotland's man and woman at the Cabinet table to urge their colleagues to do as the NFU asked, which is to stop, reset, reflect, properly engage and consult on an alternative approach to stop this change?

Kirsty McNeill: As the hon. Member is perfectly aware, the majority of estates will not be affected. We are in ongoing conversations with the National Farmers Union of Scotland. We have asked it to come forward with some worked examples of estates that may be impacted. It has not done so yet. Of course, we will continue with our ongoing conversations, but the majority of estates will not be affected.

Promoting Scotland Internationally

3. **Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help promote Scotland internationally. [902229]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): Promoting Scotland internationally is one of my four priorities. Brand Scotland is the Scotland Office's programme of international trade and investment. Promotion is about selling Scotland to the world. We have been to Norway, Singapore and Malaysia, and we plan to be in the US in April. This is an initiative for the whole of Government. We work closely with Department for Business and Trade and Foreign, Commonwealth

and Development Office colleagues in particular. Additionally, I have met many foreign ambassadors and high commissioners in the past few months. This week, I have hosted members of the diplomatic corps at Dover House to discuss Scotland's offer to the world.

Kirsteen Sullivan: Tech companies such as Calnex in my constituency export around the world, including to the US and south-east Asia. On his recent visit to south-east Asia in November, what representations did the Secretary of State make to promote Brand Scotland, specifically in the tech sector, and will he join me on a visit to Calnex to hear about the vital work that it does to support digital infrastructure?

Ian Murray: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for consistently raising the interests of her constituents in this House, and for the manner in which she does so. Technology was a key theme of my recent visit to Malaysia and Singapore. I had productive meetings with Ministers from both Governments and major companies in the region to discuss how Scotland can share its world-leading technological expertise with both countries. I encourage Calnex to engage with the Scotland Office and the national wealth fund. If my hon. Friend writes to me, we can make the relevant introductions to the company.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): When President Trump visited Scotland during his first presidency, I was tasked with officially welcoming him. The details of that will appear in my memoirs, but while we may disagree with President Trump on many specific issues, it is clear that he has a deep affection for Scotland, due to the birth of his mother on the Isle of Lewis, and his huge investment in Scottish golf at Turnberry and in the north-east, so what will the Secretary of State do to encourage economic benefit during the second Trump presidency?

Ian Murray: The President does have a deep affection for Scotland. I am sure that he also had a deep affection for the right hon. Gentleman, which I hope will appear in his memoirs. I am sure that there will be some rare unsigned copies for people to buy when they are published.

The Prime Minister has been clear, along with the Foreign Secretary, who has met President Trump and has been working very closely with the transition team, that Scotland is a key marketplace for the USA. It is not in anybody's interest, here in the United Kingdom or indeed in America, for tariffs to be put on Scottish goods. We are working very closely with both the Government here and the Government in America to ensure that does not happen.

“Make Work Pay” Initiative

4. **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the “Make Work Pay” initiative on workers in Scotland. [902230]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): Our plan for change will benefit workers in Scotland more than most. More than 100,000 workers in Scotland on zero-hours contracts could benefit from the Employment Rights Bill. The Bill will have significant

benefits for workers in insecure and low-paid jobs, and central Scotland is one area where those workers will stand to benefit the most.

Martin Rhodes: In 2023, the Low Pay Commission estimated that approximately 13,500 employees who lived in Glasgow were paid at or below the relevant minimum wage—4.8% of all employees living in the city. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the Government's “Make Work Pay” initiative for those workers and others in Scotland?

Kirsty McNeill: The increase in the national minimum wage is delivering on our commitment from day one in government that work should always pay. Modernising the UK labour market, including through extra pay and secure jobs, is at the heart of rebuilding our economy and will help us to achieve our plan for long-term national renewal and growth. In addition to the more than 13,000 workers in Glasgow my hon. Friend mentioned, national minimum wage increases will benefit workers across Scotland, with more than 4,000 in Dundee, 4,400 in the highlands and 2,900 in the Scottish Borders set to benefit, to name just a few.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Government's Employment Rights Bill will increase costs on small and medium-sized enterprises by £5 billion a year. It will make it easier to strike, and easier for employees to sue their employers. Combined with the tax rises announced in the Budget, is it not inevitable that this Labour Government will increase unemployment?

Kirsty McNeill: The hon. Gentleman might not be aware that unemployment actually came down in Scotland this week. We promised that there would be no return to austerity, and workers' payslips across Scotland were indeed protected in the Budget. More than half of employees will see either a cut or no change in their national insurance bill. The smallest businesses and charities are protected, and our decision to increase employer national insurance will raise more than £25 billion to help to rebuild Britain.

Green Energy Sector

5. **Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero on support for the green energy sector in Scotland. [902231]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): I am in regular contact with ministerial colleagues from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero on a range of issues relevant to clean energy production in Scotland. Scotland is key to the UK Government's clean power by 2030 mission, which will deliver cheaper bills, energy security and future jobs, and drive growth in the Scottish economy.

Richard Foord: The roll-out of offshore renewables in Scotland should happen alongside the growth of supply chains there. That is vital if the energy transition is to deliver jobs and investment in Scotland's oil and gas communities. It is welcome that the Government have allocated £200 million to a clean industry bonus, but that falls short of the £500 million that Labour pledged in its manifesto. How do the Government plan to strengthen the clean industry bonus to build thriving renewable manufacturing in the UK?

Ian Murray: It is a very good question, because our clean power by 2030 mission will ensure that the Government can deliver that. GB Energy has been set up to look at supply chains and all the other issues around how we do so. I hope that GB Energy will be able to look at some of those issues in the round, but the key thing is to ensure that we have the supply chain infrastructure to be able to deliver that mission.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can Members who are just roaming around the Chamber remember that there are other people here and have a little more courtesy?

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): If the Grangemouth refinery closes in 2025 and the recommendations of Project Willow will not be ready for years to come, thousands of jobs will be lost—the very definition of an unjust transition. How can the Government possibly claim to have a credible industrial strategy for Scotland if they allow that to happen?

Ian Murray: The closure of the Grangemouth refinery is regrettable. My hon. Friend needs to reflect on the fact that the previous Government and the Scottish Government had 32 years combined to do something about Grangemouth and did not lift a finger. Since we came into government in July, we have got the £100 million Falkirk and Grangemouth growth deal over the line and delivered some short-term help for the workers at Grangemouth. We continue to work with the company and the trade unions on the Grangemouth refinery. We look forward to Project Willow coming to fruition this month, and the Government are fully committed to ensuring that we see that through.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks about Denis Law, whom I had the pleasure of interviewing more than once in my previous career.

I welcome the Government's commitment to energy security as well as to green energy and net zero. This week, it has been reported that the Scottish Government could fund up to £60 million to both Mingyang, to build a wind turbine factory in the highlands, and Orient Cable to provide the undersea cables and connections for offshore wind. Given that those are both Chinese-owned companies, have the UK Government and the Secretary of State had any discussions with the Scottish Government to ensure that there are mitigating steps, such as ensuring local control and not using cellular modules, and have the security services been consulted?

Ian Murray: A key question and one of the topic agenda items that we always have with the Scottish Government is how we can deliver clean power by 2030, because obviously it is a joint endeavour. The Chancellor was in China last month, and we will work with China when it is in our national interests to do so. One of the key points is that Great British Energy will be looking in the round at supply chains and at how we can deliver that mission by 2030, but the hon. Member will be as surprised as I am that the SNP voted against GB Energy and, indeed, the record Budget settlement in Scotland.

Great British Energy

6. **Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of Great British Energy on Scotland. [902232]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Ian Murray): GB Energy is owned by the public and headquartered in Aberdeen, because Scotland will be at the forefront of the UK becoming the clean energy superpower that it wants to be by 2030. GB Energy's activities will support and enhance the delivery of priority supply chains and infrastructure development, helping to speed up the existing Scottish offshore wind pipeline and other clean energy projects.

Tom Hayes: Eight years ago, Nicola Sturgeon promised a publicly owned energy company, but after spending £500,000 on consultants, the Scottish Government have now dropped the plan. Does the Secretary of State agree that while Labour ploughs ahead with delivering GB Energy, owned by the British people and headquartered in Scotland, it is the SNP who are breaking their promises and letting down Scotland, our Union and the protection of our planet?

Ian Murray: I congratulate my hon. Friend on being the new mission champion for clean energy. He is absolutely right. While the SNP makes promises it breaks, this Labour Government are determined to deliver for Scotland. Maybe that is why SNP MPs in this House voted against GB Energy. We are delivering for Scotland. We promised GB Energy; that has been delivered. We promised to end austerity; that has been delivered. We promised to make work pay; that has been delivered. While the SNP only delivers managed decline for Scotland, we are getting on with improving the economy.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): There are no clear plans for Great British Energy, but there are very clear plans to end new licences for oil and gas in the North sea. Gary Smith of the GMB has said that stopping new licences is "the employment equivalent of a Grangemouth refinery closing nearly every week from 2025 to 2030." When will the Secretary of State stand up for Scotland, oppose the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, protect jobs and ensure that we do not have more imports with higher emissions?

Ian Murray: GB Energy is there, with the national wealth fund, to deliver that just transition in clean power by 2030. Oil and gas in the North sea will be here for decades to come, and I ask the right hon. Gentleman to work with us to deliver that just transition, rather than scaremongering the workers of the north-east.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Despite mighty work by Conservative Members of the other place, sadly the Great British Energy Bill continues to make progress through the House of Lords. To remind you, Mr Speaker, the chairman of Great British Energy is based in Manchester but leading a company headquartered in Aberdeen. In Committee in October it was claimed that GB Energy would directly

employ 1,000 people; by November, that had fallen to 300 people. What is the figure, what are those jobs, where will they be based and what on earth will GB Energy actually do?

Ian Murray: I am surprised that the shadow Secretary of State is championing the lines of the SNP. GB Energy is headquartered in Scotland. In fact, it is headquartered in the region that he represents in Scotland, it is capitalised with £125 million and it will bring valuable jobs to his constituency. I suspect he might want to go back to his constituents this weekend and explain why he does not want those new jobs and industries of the future in his constituency.

Support for Women Pensioners

7. **Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the adequacy of Government support for women pensioners in Scotland. [902233]

9. **Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the adequacy of Government support for women pensioners in Scotland. [902235]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): The Labour Government's choice to protect the pension triple lock means that millions of women pensioners will see their yearly pensions rise by up to £470 in April, and by up to £1,900 over this Parliament. That stands in stark contrast to the Conservative party, who cut the state pension of over 1 million Scots. The Conservatives are still in chaos, announcing policies on the hoof that would mean a raid on pension pots. Meanwhile, this Labour Government are taking tough decisions and action to clean up the Tories' economic mess.

Kirsty Blackman: Do the Minister and the Secretary of State agree with Labour MSPs that WASPI women deserve compensation?

Kirsty McNeill: I appreciate that campaigners are disappointed, but the hon. Lady has got herself in a bit of a fankle and is eliding two separate issues: a decision about the legality of the changes and the question of compensation. The ombudsman's findings showed that the vast majority of WASPI women knew that the state pension age was changing. It is therefore difficult to justify up to £10 billion for a compensation scheme and conclude that that is a fair, proportionate and good value-for-money use of public funds.

Mr Speaker: Will Members please look at where the questions are coming from? Not doing so is disrespectful and not the way we should be carrying on. I am talking about senior Members who should know better. Here is a good example of a new Member—I call Ann Davies.

Ann Davies: Thank you, Mr Llefarydd. In 2021, the then Secretary of State called for a vote on redress for 1950s-born women, urging the UK Government to get on the front foot and offer serious compensation to those affected, but women in Scotland and Wales have

seen the same broken promises from Labour. The now First Minister of Wales pledged in 2018 that a Labour Government would right that injustice. With the Secretary of State, the Welsh First Minister and Labour politicians across these isles turning their backs on 1950s women in Scotland, Wales and elsewhere, why should those women ever again believe a word they say?

Kirsty McNeill: I am afraid that another hon. Member is in a bit of a fankle. The question about the legality of the changes has been settled by the courts. The question that the hon. Lady and her allies must answer is why they think that up to £10 billion of public money should be spent on compensation. Is that proportionate, fair, feasible and value for money? The Government's view is that it is not.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that alongside the triple lock, the most important thing for women pensioners in Scotland is fixing our NHS, and that the SNP Government must act urgently to ensure that vulnerable Scots do not face what even the SNP Health Secretary has described as unacceptable waits for treatment?

Kirsty McNeill: I could not agree more. Scotland's NHS is in crisis; one in six Scots are on a waiting list. The UK Government have provided a record investment to fix Scotland's public services. The Scottish Government led by the SNP should get on with it.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): The most common problem raised with me by women pensioners is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) says, the enormous waiting lists. Researchers from Oxford University, Strathclyde University and Edinburgh University have predicted that by the time the SNP leaves office, almost a million Scots will be on waiting lists. How can we ensure that the billions provided in the Labour Budget do not go down the same drain as everything else given to the SNP?

Kirsty McNeill: One in six Scots is on a waiting list today, and we face a housing emergency and a very stubborn attainment gap. Nobody could look around Scotland and say that it is going in the right direction. That is the choice that people will have to make in 2026: is Scotland going in the right or wrong direction? Canny Scots will, I am sure, make choices in the interest of their families and say that it is time to replace a failing SNP Government.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP)
rose—

Hon. Members: Hurray!

Stephen Gethins: I welcome that welcome from the Labour Benches.

The Minister campaigned on compensation for WASPI women, as the Secretary of State for Scotland did, so will she tell me, if she will not listen to the women and if she will not listen to the ombudsman, will she listen to Scottish Labour MSPs who called for compensation?

Kirsty McNeill: There is a third Member in a dreadful fankle. We said at the election that we would wait for the ombudsman's report, we would examine it and we would take a view. We have a taken view: we have taken a view that up to £10 billion of public money should not be spent providing compensation on a decision that was legal and of which it has been concluded that the vast majority of 1950s-born women were aware.

Stephen Gethins: The Secretary of State recently reacted to Labour's dip in the polls in Scotland by saying that the voters "don't like honesty". I wonder if it was more to do with Labour not keeping its commitment to women pensioners, or saying that it would decrease fuel bills—and they went up—or saying that it would tackle child poverty and then taking on some of the most regressive Tory policies on the two-child cap? As we approach Burns night, I wonder if the bard was right when he said:

"Dare to be honest and fear no labour."

Nowadays, would he say, "Dare to be honest and fear the voters"?

Kirsty McNeill: Polls come, polls go. The fact remains that this Labour Government have provided record investment for Scottish public services. I suggest the hon. Member invests in a notepad so that he can keep track.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [902311] **David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 22 January.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): The senseless, barbaric murder of three young girls in Southport was devastating. A measure of justice has been done, but for the victims, the injured and the affected, we must see a fundamental change in how Britain protects its citizens and its children. As part of the public inquiry, we will not let any institution deflect from its failures.

Next Monday marks Holocaust Memorial Day. Visiting Auschwitz last week only strengthened my resolve to build a national Holocaust memorial and learning centre beside this Parliament.

The whole House will welcome the release of Emily Damari and other hostages from Gaza. We must now see the ceasefire deal implemented in full, the release of the remaining hostages and a surge in aid into Gaza for citizens.

May I also welcome Cheryl Korb, whose young daughter Olivia was murdered in awful circumstances, and her sister Antonia to the Chamber? I have met them twice, and we will change the law so that the most serious offenders attend their sentencing hearings.

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

David Reed: Before Christmas, I received nearly 1,000 handwritten letters from pupils at St Peter's secondary school in Exeter. Each letter strongly advocated for greater support to tackle the mental health challenges

faced by young people, with many sharing deeply unsettling personal stories. I am committed to improving local mental health services to help young people build the resilience they need to live happy and healthy lives. However, I know these challenges are not unique to my constituency and are being faced by children across our country. So can the Prime Minister please outline what steps his Government are taking to enhance mental health support for our children nationwide?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising an issue of huge concern in his constituency and in all constituencies. Far too many young people are not receiving the care that they need, so we will provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school, recruit an additional 8,500 staff to deal with children's and adult mental health services, and roll out our Young Futures hubs in every community.

Q3. [902314] **Markus Campbell-Savours** (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): My right hon. and learned Friend will understand the importance of farming to the economy of my constituency of Penrith and Solway, and to Cumbria as a whole. With recent reports of foot and mouth outbreaks in Germany, and concerns being expressed over transmission to the United Kingdom, will the Prime Minister assure the House that all Departments are on high alert and vigilant in monitoring the situation, particularly at places of entry, including airports where meat import controls can be lax? We must avoid the disaster that this would bring to UK farming.

The Prime Minister: We will do whatever it takes to protect farmers from the risk posed by foot and mouth. That is why we acted swiftly to ban imports of cattle, pigs and sheep and their products from Germany, to protect farmers. We will not hesitate to restrict imports from additional countries if the disease spreads, and we will keep the situation under close and careful review.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): May I take this opportunity to welcome the release of hostages, including Emily Damari, from barbaric captivity? I also know that the thoughts of many will be with the victims of the Southport killings. There are important questions to answer, and I will return to those after the case is concluded.

Between 2009 and 2022 the OECD found that children in England rose up global league tables in maths, reading and science. Conservative Government action means that English schools now top the western world at maths and reading, but the Prime Minister's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which will be voted on in Committee this week, reverses the improvements that made that happen. The Bill is an act of vandalism. It is wrecking a cross-party consensus that lasted for decades. Why does the Prime Minister think that so many school leaders are criticising the Bill?

The Prime Minister: It was Labour that introduced academies in the first place to drive up standards. Academies are here to stay, and will continue to drive up standards. That is what the Bill is about. Also in that Bill are important provisions for protecting children, including a provision to stop abusers taking children

out of school, and a unique identifier to ensure that the whereabouts of all children are known. What did the Leader of the Opposition do? She instructed Conservative Members to vote against those measures.

Mrs Badenoch: The right hon. and learned Gentleman did not even bother voting on that Bill. He talks about safeguarding measures, but that is not what the issue is—this is about the reforms that he is changing. We have an example of where those reforms were not introduced—Wales, which has been under Labour control for two decades. Welsh educational outcomes have tumbled down international league tables, and poor children in England now do better than wealthier children in Wales. The Bill denies children the guarantee that their failing schools will be turned into a better academy. It is an attack on excellence, it is an attack on higher standards, and it is an attack on aspiration. The Bill is the worst of socialism. Is it not deprived children in England who will pay the price?

The Prime Minister: As I said, we introduced academies, we are committed to them, and we are driving standards up. The Bill is important because it also sets up breakfast clubs for the very children that the right hon. Lady claims to champion. It limits the expense of school uniform, and puts in place vital protections for children. She has to answer the question: why did she instruct all of them to vote against child protection measures?

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister thinks that he can distract people from what is wrong with the Bill. This is not about breakfast clubs and school uniforms. Teachers and parents will be horrified at just how bad this Bill is. Even his own MPs may not realise it, but the Bill will cut teachers' pay—it cuts pay for 20,000 teachers. His Education Secretary says that there is “not a ceiling” for pay—[*Interruption.*] Labour Members are all shaking their heads; they clearly have not read the Bill. The Education Secretary hasn't read the Bill either, because clause 45 means that teachers' pay will be capped. Did the Prime Minister know that the Bill as it stands will cut teachers' pay?

The Prime Minister: We do need flexibility in our schools. If the Leader of the Opposition had hopped off social media for a while, she would have seen the amendment put down this morning to achieve that end.¹ She says that the Bill is not about child protection; we had a young child killed who was taken out of school by an abuser. The Bill closes that gap—that is urgently needed. We have children who have not gone back to school since covid. The Bill closes that gap. She can make her points on academies and we can debate academies, but to vote against the Bill is a disgrace on all Conservative Members.

Mrs Badenoch: That is nonsense. The amendment that the Prime Minister is talking about does not address the issue. He raises academies, and that is exactly what I am talking about. Like every parent, I believe that all our children should have the best teachers. Apart from the issue of cutting teachers' pay, the head of year 11 at Michaela—the most successful school in the country—came from the armed forces. The headmistress of that school has said that with Labour's new rules, she would “never have been able to hire him.”

Those are the academy freedoms that I am talking about. The Bill would have blocked that veteran from teaching. The Bill implies that doctors are not sufficiently qualified to teach biology and that an Olympic medallist cannot teach PE. Why is the Prime Minister closing down routes into teaching when we should be opening up more of them?

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Opposition knows that that is not right. [*Interruption.*] No, it is not. Look at the provisions in the Bill. To say that teachers in our schools ought to be qualified should not be extraordinary or opposed. Under the Conservatives' watch, we had far too many examples of secondary schools missing teachers. When we needed maths teachers—they championed maths—we did not have enough maths teachers in our secondary schools. I want every single child to have the best possible education.

Mrs Badenoch: The facts speak for themselves: standards went up under Conservative Governments. What we need to know is who is benefiting. Everyone is asking: who is benefiting from these changes? It is not teachers—their pay is being capped. It is not parents—their choices are being restricted. It is definitely not children—their outcomes will get worse. So who is benefiting? It is the trade unions. The National Education Union sent out a tick list proving that after a decade and a half, it is finally getting its way. Why is the Education Secretary allowing trade unions to run her Department and ruin children's education?

The Prime Minister: The Bill benefits the children who need the nourishment of a breakfast club. The Bill benefits the families who cannot afford uniforms. The Bill benefits the children who are currently out of school and nobody knows where they are. The Bill will benefit the children who could be taken out of school by abusers were it not to go through. The Leader of the Opposition should change her mind and support these vital provisions.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister needs to get out more and speak to schools. I was at the Harris academy just this month, and what is it saying? The Bill reverses two decades of progress. It is imposing Labour's new curriculum on every school, taxing the education of children with special needs and excluding talented outsiders—the closed shop is back. This is pure educational vandalism. Alongside those attacks, Labour is removing single-word Ofsted judgments so that parents cannot see standards slipping. It is the same old Labour: bad outcomes for all children; excellence for none.

I know what it is like to go to a school that did not care about standards—this is a tragedy in the making. The key changes in the Bill were not in Labour's election manifesto. Is that not because the Prime Minister knew that parents and teachers would reject them?

The Prime Minister: Parents and teachers know that we introduced academies. Parents and teachers know that we are driven by standards. We are committed to standards—they are part of the future—and we will continue to focus on them.

The Leader of the Opposition talks about special needs. She has got a nerve; I don't know. Conservative Members know it: they have asked me at Prime Minister's

1. [*Official Report*, 28 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 2WC.] (Correction)

questions about the appalling situation of special needs under their watch. We are going to fix that mess like we are fixing every other mess.

Q4. [902315] Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Parents should feel confident that when their child is sick, they can take them to their local hospital to be treated as soon as possible. But last year, when my son was having difficulty breathing, like many parents I could not take him to the Alexandra hospital in Redditch, as paediatric services were temporarily closed in 2016 and have never been reinstated. As part of this Government's record investment in our NHS, will the Prime Minister meet me to explore ways to enable local integrated care boards to reinstate critical services for growing towns like Redditch?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue, which I know he has campaigned on for a very long time. We are investing a record £25 billion in the NHS as part of our plan for change. Building an NHS fit for the future means that places like Redditch will see lower waiting lists and services that reflect needs. While responsibility over service rests with the appropriate NHS commissioner, I will ensure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I echo the Prime Minister's opening remarks about the Southport killings and Holocaust Memorial Day, and I particularly join him in expressing our immense relief at the release of Emily Damari and in celebrating that she is back with her mum Mandy and the rest of her family. Let us hope that all the hostages are released as soon as possible, and that the ceasefire turns into a lasting peace.

Last week, I urged the Prime Minister to speed up the social care commission, to implement the changes that people need this year. The very next day, it was announced that the chair of the social care commission was also going to chair another important inquiry, into grooming gangs. The Prime Minister said that the job of chairing the commission is so enormous that it cannot be completed within three years, yet he also said the chair of that commission, Baroness Casey, has enough free time over the next few months to chair another inquiry. How can both those things be true?

The Prime Minister: Baroness Casey is well placed to conduct the audit into grooming gangs, given her hard-hitting report on exploitation in Rotherham. That does not affect her work on the independent commission on adult social care, which begins in April. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the first part of that commission will report next year, so that we can deliver recommendations as we receive them. Already we are introducing fair pay agreements, providing more money for social care funding and putting up the allowance. We are already taking steps. There will be a two-part report and we will act on the recommendations as they arrive, but this needs to be done properly.

Ed Davey: I still do not think the Prime Minister is giving social care reform the priority that it needs. It is urgent, so I will keep coming back to that to hold him to account.

Turning to the United States, can the Prime Minister guarantee that he will not sell out Britain's fantastic farmers to Donald Trump in a trade deal that undermines our high food and animal welfare standards, in the way that the Conservatives sold them out in the Australia and New Zealand deals?

The Prime Minister: We will work with the US and with other countries, but we will never lower our standards.

Q5. [902316] Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): Thousands of my constituents have had to put up with years of misery because of unsafe fire protection in their homes, developers dragging their feet and leaseholders having to foot the bill for mistakes that they did not make. Does the Prime Minister agree that enough is enough, and it is time for developers to make all homes safe? Will he reassure leaseholders, who bought their homes in good faith, that this Government have their back?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. Too many buildings are still unsafe, and the speed of delivery has been far too slow. Our action plan sets out measures to identify buildings at risk and fix them faster. My message is clear: the funding is there to fix this, and there is no excuse not to deliver for residents.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): Expanding London's airports and building a third runway at Heathrow would be incredibly irresponsible in the midst of a climate emergency, flying in the face of the Climate Change Committee's advice. The Prime Minister clearly knows that, because he and seven Cabinet colleagues voted against a third runway at Heathrow in 2018. Will he confirm his position?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to comment on speculation. The hon. Gentleman knows that this Government are committed to growth, to the aviation sector and to our climate obligations. I am not going to take lectures from those who talk about climate change, but oppose vital renewable infrastructure in their own constituencies.

Q6. [902317] Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): In Swindon North, we have the Panattoni Park development, which is one of the largest employment developments in Europe and has massive potential for growth. Will the Prime Minister join me in acknowledging the site for boosting economic growth in not only my region but the country, and will he visit it with me?

The Prime Minister: Growth is at the heart of our plan for change, which will fund our public services, create good jobs and raise living standards across the country. My hon. Friend is right to champion one of the largest brownfield sites in the UK, which could create more than 11,000 jobs on site and add £1.2 billion to the economy. It underlines the importance of this Government bringing economic stability, creating the national wealth fund and driving up growth.

Q2. [902312] Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The Prime Minister recently visited Epsom hospital, where he committed to not just papering over the cracks in the NHS after years of Conservative lies. However, on Monday, his Government confirmed that St Helier

hospital will be allowed to develop further wounds, and that the hospital will crumble. St Helier will not survive the delay the Government have announced; people will die, and NHS staff will break. Will the Prime Minister apologise to my constituents, as they wait years for a new hospital building, and will he visit St Helier with me to witness at first hand the dire situation our residents face?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the concerns of his constituents; I am not surprised they are frustrated and even angry at the lack of delivery under the previous Government. There was no credible plan—[*Interruption.*] Let me read the Infrastructure and Projects Authority's verdict on what we inherited—

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): That was your decision!

Mr Speaker: Order. I expect better from those on the Front Bench, Mr Philp, and I am sure you are going to show better.

The Prime Minister: He was Liz Truss's right-hand man, so we wouldn't expect anything else.

The IPA's verdict on the previous Government's plan was that there were "major issues"—[*Interruption.*] This is the Conservatives' record; they should not be chuckling. The verdict was that there were "major issues" with the definition, schedule, budget, quality and delivery. It was a fiction—always was.

Q7. [902318] **Jo Platt** (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): Alongside other Greater Manchester MPs, I recently met constituents who shared distressing accounts of a spinal surgeon's malpractice affecting many across the region. They have formed an injured staff and patient group, but despite a review, they feel that justice has not been served, and the hospital trust is yet to conduct a full patient recall. Will the Prime Minister arrange a meeting with the group and the relevant Minister to help them to get the justice they deserve?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this awful case—the stories and accounts are heartbreaking and deeply concerning. I will make sure that she and the group receive a meeting with the relevant Health Minister at the earliest opportunity.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The Prime Minister's Budget raised taxes, borrowing and public spending as a strategy for economic growth. When will he accept the words of one Labour Prime Minister in the 1970s, who explained to a Labour conference that

"in all candour...that option no longer exists",

and that the only way to obtain sustained economic growth is by cutting taxes and regulation?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman must have missed recent reports. The Office for National Statistics has just said that we have the highest investment in 19 years; PwC has just said that this is the second-best place to invest in the world; and the International Monetary Fund has just upgraded growth, now saying we are predicted to be the fastest growing major European economy. Wages are up and inflation is down—that is after just six months.

Q8. [902319] **Rosie Wrighting** (Kettering) (Lab): Kettering general hospital is where I was born and cared for as a premature baby, but after 14 years of the Conservatives underfunding the NHS, that same maternity ward is partially closed because of reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete. After giving birth, mothers are transported outside, through the car park, to receive post-natal care. Will the Prime Minister visit Kettering general to discuss how we can support services, like the maternity ward, while we await our rebuild?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has been a determined champion of Kettering general hospital, and rightly so. There is deep anger about the delay to the work because of the Conservative's failure to have a plan, but while we implement our affordable and deliverable plan to build a new hospital, I can reassure her that the RAAC identified at Kettering general is being mitigated and replaced through the national RAAC programme.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Before Christmas, Lord Robertson, who is leading the strategic defence review, came before the Defence Committee and told us that he could not guarantee that the strategic outcomes from the review would be fully funded. Recently, we have also heard in media reports that the review might be delayed until the autumn—a delay of six months. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to state categorically to the House that the strategic defence review, with its important requirements for the defence of our nation, will be fully funded and delivered on time?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to that because this is a serious review into our defence. The review needs to ensure we understand the challenges we face and have the capability to deal with those challenges in the modern era, so that is the exercise that is going through. We have committed to the path to 2.5%. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the last time 2.5% of GDP was spent on defence was under the last Labour Government, and that is the difference between the approach on this side of the House and the approach on that side of the House.

Q9. [902320] **Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): Huddersfield royal infirmary has recently reduced its elective waiting list from a high of 4,000 to just 20. Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to NHS staff at my local hospital? Will he ensure that the NHS learns from the HRI's innovative approaches, such as the use of AI for scans and its partnership with the University of Huddersfield's national health and innovation campus? When the Prime Minister does his hospital tour, may I also invite him to Huddersfield to see the transformative work being done?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, because the achievements of hard-working staff at Huddersfield royal infirmary prove that we can bring down waiting times through our plans for change. It is important that we are applying that best practice and innovation across the NHS. We must do more. We inherited record waiting lists and we are now bringing them down.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): In what is supposed to be a honeymoon period for a new Government, the Prime Minister has sacked his chief of staff, forced his City Minister and his Transport Secretary to resign, while No. 10 has been briefing against the Pensions

Secretary, the Home Secretary and the Education Secretary. Is it not time that the Prime Minister accepts that the root causes at the heart of his Government are with him, not them?

The Prime Minister: We have just won a landslide victory and we have massive majority. We are getting on with the job—*[Interruption.]* Look at the sheer number of Ministers that the Conservatives got through on a yearly basis, causing instability in every conceivable Department.

Q10. [902321] **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): In 2016, I was diagnosed with colon cancer and had excellent treatment at Huddersfield royal infirmary. I was one of the lucky ones, because after 2015 the Tory Government failed in the fight against cancer, with over 380,000 patients in England not treated on time. What assurance can the Prime Minister offer Colne Valley residents that the reforms and extra investment he has announced will address that issue?

The Prime Minister: I wish my hon. Friend a speedy recovery from his recent treatment, and I thank the doctors and nurses who treated him. Under the previous Government, there was no progress made in diagnosing cancer at stage 1 and 2 between 2013 and 2021. That is an appalling inheritance. We are spending £1.5 billion on new surgical hubs and diagnostic scanners to ensure cancer patients get the care they need.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Eating disorders are the mental health disorder with the highest mortality rate, and we have at least 1.2 million sufferers. Some are being told that they are now too ill to be treated, yet eating disorders are entirely treatable. Today the all-party parliamentary group on eating disorders is publishing its report on how to make eating disorder services fit for purpose. May I ask the Prime Minister to pay very close attention to that report?

The Prime Minister: Let me start by recognising the hon. Lady's dedicated work and campaigning on this issue for many years. NHS England is expanding eating disorder treatment services, including crisis care and intensive home treatment, and, as she knows, the Online Safety Act 2023 will prevent children from encountering harmful content that promotes eating disorders to services. Obviously, we will look very carefully at the report and consider its recommendations.

Q11. [902322] **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): In the past few days, Luton has suffered two stabbings. In addition, one woman has been murdered and another seriously injured, and a manhunt for the suspect is currently under way. This January alone, there have been at least 12 recorded violent offences in Luton. After decades of being funded as a rural police force, Bedfordshire Police has had to make do with special grants to tackle serious and violent crime. Does the Prime Minister agree that proper police funding is essential to keeping people in Luton North safe, and will he ensure that Bedfordshire Police receives the grants that we need to fight crime on our streets?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this case. She and I have met far too many families who have been devastated by this senseless violence. We are taking urgent action to ban zombie-style knives, and we are regulating the online sale of knives. It is unacceptable

that these murder weapons can be bought with two clicks. Technology is there to stop it and we are going to take action. As for resources, we are putting an additional 13,000 police into neighbourhood roles and allocating £85 million to Bedfordshire Police to keep my hon. Friend's constituents safe.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): May I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about the ceasefire and the release of hostages? Let us all pray that the remaining hostages on both sides are released as soon as possible. Since the ceasefire in Gaza came into effect, Israeli forces have placed the whole of the west bank under strict military inspection as part of the Iron Wall operation. The Israel Defence Forces have launched a large-scale offensive operation in the city of Jenin, with numerous drone strikes on the infrastructure and a military raid by IDF troops and special forces in the occupied west bank. At least nine people have been killed by Israeli forces and 40 have been injured, including several healthcare workers. What urgent steps are the Government taking to protect Palestinians—including healthcare workers—and to prevent atrocities in the west bank, and will the Prime Minister outline the UK's response to the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on Israel's unlawful occupation?

The Prime Minister: I am deeply concerned by what is happening in the west bank. We have raised it a number of times in the various exchanges that we have had, but I am deeply concerned about it, and we are doing everything we can to alleviate the situation.

Q12. [902323] **Sarah Edwards** (Tamworth) (Lab): Tamworth castle, which boasts 1,000 years of history, was recently added to the "Heritage at Risk" register following my campaign about its future. Despite needing repairs, it provides a unique and valuable learning environment, welcoming both the public and schools to learn about Tamworth's rich history. Will the Prime Minister visit Tamworth to see how an 11th-century castle is providing 21st-century learning opportunities while promoting local heritage?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind invitation. I particularly enjoyed Tamworth's recent FA Cup heroics against Tottenham, although they did not quite win. We are committed to protecting our most vulnerable heritage, and I know that Historic England is working closely with Tamworth borough council to preserve this local treasure for future generations. It is particularly important to continue school visit programmes, supporting our mission to give every child the best opportunities in life.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Across England, 95,000 students attend non-academised sixth-form colleges. Of those colleges, 32 are currently on strike because the Government did not settle the funding for them last summer. Can the Prime Minister tell me whether he intended to create a two-tier education system for sixth-form students who are victims of the covid crisis?

The Prime Minister: We have put more money into colleges and, as the hon. Lady knows, it is for them to deal with these disputes.

Q13. [902324] **Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): From Stafford to Eccleshall and Loggerheads, my constituents are sick and tired of having their properties and businesses devastated

by flooding. The last Conservative Government did not invest enough in flood prevention measures to stop this happening. Can the Prime Minister assure me and my constituents that he will prioritise flood prevention investment before the homes and businesses on Sandon Road in Stafford disappear completely into Sandyford brook?

The Prime Minister: My sympathies go to my hon. Friend's constituents; far too many are experiencing terrible flooding. I visited Stafford last year, and they talked me through the misery of their experience. We inherited flood defences in their worst condition on record. We are now investing £2.4 million in flood defences to better protect communities, and we have committed £60 million to support farmers impacted by extreme weather.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Two-year mortgages have hit 5%, borrowing is billions of pounds above forecast and retail sales have slumped. Does the Prime Minister still believe that the Chancellor is doing a good job?

The Prime Minister: I thought the hon. Lady was just reading out the last Government's record.

Q14. [902325] **Matt Turmaine** (Watford) (Lab): Before the last election, the Conservatives baselessly promised a fully funded scheme to deliver a new Watford hospital—something they failed to achieve in 14 years. Does the Prime Minister share my frustration, and that of my constituents, that the Conservatives unforgivably failed to budget for its construction? Watford will only get its new hospital built and paid for thanks to the properly planned approach of this Labour Government.

The Prime Minister: I am not surprised that my hon. Friend's constituents are frustrated. There was never a plan; the funding only ever existed in Boris Johnson's imagination. It was pure fiction and the Conservatives know it. We have an affordable delivery plan to build these new hospitals, including Watford general, and we will be getting on with it.

Competition and Markets Authority Chairman

12.37 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if he will make a statement on the position of the chairman of the Competition and Markets Authority.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): Following the resignation of the chair of the Competition and Markets Authority, Marcus Bokkerink, the Secretary of State has appointed Doug Gurr as the interim chair for a period of up to 18 months while our new permanent chair is appointed. The Secretary of State has expressed his gratitude for Marcus's leadership of the board of the CMA since his appointment in September 2022, and for the work of the CMA in that time, particularly in response to cost of living pressures.

As the Prime Minister set out in his speech at the international investment summit, this Government will ensure that every regulator in the UK focuses on growth. Given Doug Gurr's background and experience as an entrepreneur and business leader, and his clear understanding of the importance of new and developing technologies such as artificial intelligence, he will bring the necessary strategic leadership to the CMA to enable it to promote growth for the benefit of businesses and consumers. As set out in the industrial strategy Green Paper, the Government will shortly be consulting on a new growth-focused strategic steer for the CMA. While respecting the independence of the CMA and the decision making of its panel members, the steer will be clear about the Government's expectations of the CMA in supporting growth across the economy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Griffith: Thank you for granting this important urgent question, Mr Speaker.

What a desperate state we are in when the Business Secretary has to phone up the regulators to beg them for ideas to fix the lack of growth that his own Government's policies have created. I hope that when the regulators attended the roundtable last week, including the chairman of the CMA, they had the courage to put at the top of their list scrapping the Business Secretary's 150-page, job-destroying and trade union-inspired Employment Rights Bill; or to point out the jobs tax in the Chancellor's Budget, Labour's socialist attacks on inheritance and non-doms, and the family business death tax that is causing one wealth creator to leave this country every 45 minutes; or even to point out that one of the best opportunities that this country has for growth would be to get on a plane to our closest trading partner, the United States, and secure a trade deal, rather than lob juvenile insults at President Trump or fail to invite Elon Musk to the Government's UK investment summit.

It is certainly the case that, while regulators have a role, they generally depress growth and drive risk aversion, bureaucracy and slow decision making. Asking regulators

to boost growth is a bit like asking the village speed watch to organise the next British grand prix. I am a fan of speed watch.

The Conservative party is under new management, and we are unafraid to back wealth creators and risk takers. We are unashamed to say that we need fewer civil servants and arm's length regulators so that our businesses carry less dead weight in the global race to be competitive, but dismissing the non-executive, part-time chair of the CMA seems a curious place to start. He is not responsible for day-to-day decision making at the CMA; that is the job of the chief executive. Did they aim and miss? Can the Minister confirm whether there are plans to change the Government's view on the CMA's remit, to play the ball and not the man? What evaluation has there been of all regulators as part of this process, and when will the Government publish it?

Justin Madders: I think there were a couple of questions in there about the role of the CMA chair. Of course, he did not get sacked; he resigned. A new strategic steer for the CMA will be coming out in due course. The hon. Gentleman's tirade of criticisms of this Government was a bit rich coming from a man who was in the Treasury when the last Government crashed the economy. I would point out that PwC announced only this week that we were the second most attractive country in the world to invest in, and that the International Monetary Fund last week upgraded our growth predictions for this year. We are going to be the highest-growing major economy in Europe this year, and that shows our determination to get the growth going, which was something that his Government failed completely on.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): Getting the right regulatory environment is vital to drive innovation in our economy and also to protect our consumers and markets. Does the Minister agree that this renewed focus on the regulatory environment and getting it right to drive our economy will make sure that this Government deliver our No. 1 mission of growth?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Growth is the No. 1 mission for this Government, and getting the balance right between protecting consumers and driving up growth in the economy means that we all benefit. That is something we are very clear about on this side of the House, and something that the last Government failed to deliver on.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The Government are right to say that bold and ambitious steps are needed to get our economy growing again, especially after the damage caused by the previous Conservative Government, but we must also recognise that fair competition is the lifeblood of our market economy, which helps to drive innovation and ensures that economic benefits reach consumers. Does the Minister agree that ensuring proper competition in the economy is vital to achieving sustained growth? I also note that the new interim chair's prior experience includes running Amazon's UK business. Will the Minister guarantee that the digital markets unit within the CMA will be backed to hold powerful tech giants accountable, for the benefit of customers in Wokingham and across the UK?

Justin Madders: We are absolutely clear that we need to protect consumers, but we also need to drive growth. The new interim chair's experience will be really important in helping us to understand how the tech companies will move forward, and his chairmanship of the Alan Turing Institute gives him valuable experience to bring to the table in delivering on that.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I should declare an interest, having worked for a competition regulator for a number of years before entering Parliament. I suggest that the Minister does not take any competition policy lessons from the Conservatives, who oversaw the re-monopolisation of the broadband network, the consolidation of power within tech networks on an unprecedented scale, and the rise of crony capitalism on a scale not seen before. Some rumours around this appointment have suggested that it is a signal of a flight away from competition regulation. Can I urge him to quash those rumours and confirm that this Government believe that competition drives investment, innovation and growth, and that this country is open for investment and new market entry by as many companies as possible?

Justin Madders: We absolutely agree that competition is vital for driving investment and growth. The CMA will remain operationally independent, as it always has been.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The Government seem fascinated by the price of Oasis tickets. Meanwhile, debt and the cost of debt are soaring. Should the Government—definitely, not maybe—come up with some ideas of their own for growth, rather than trying to copy the homework of regulators?

Justin Madders: We have our own ideas for growth. We have important planning reforms coming forward, and the industrial strategy, which drives forward the strengths of the UK economy. As for the hon. Gentleman's Oasis pun, I think he needs to work a bit harder on that one.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): Having spent 15 years dealing with the CMA in my campaign to end the abuse of the secondary ticketing market, I have long felt that the CMA is in desperate need of much stronger and clearer ministerial oversight. Can the Minister confirm today which Minister will have oversight of the CMA, and that it will be an active role, not a role in name only?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her work on secondary ticketing, a subject on which there is currently a consultation. I am the Minister responsible for the CMA. A new strategic steer for the CMA will be issued later this year, and of course it will remain independent from Government.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The clear issue here is why the previous chair resigned, and what remit the Minister has given the interim chair to change the policy and direction of the CMA. Can the Minister outline that remit for the House? He says he will do it later this year, but he has manoeuvred a position in which the previous chair has resigned. We need to know what the CMA will be doing now to regulate the market.

Justin Madders: The CMA's operational independence will remain intact. We have clearly set out that there will be a new strategic steer, which will be about boosting growth. After conversations, we have decided that new leadership is needed to deliver on that.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I should declare that before entering the House, I advised, as a competition lawyer, on various CMA matters, including investigations and panels. Some of the criticisms from Conservative Members seem half a world away, to channel Oasis, from both the topic in question and economic reality. Will the Minister confirm that yesterday's announcement does not change the independence of the individual CMA panels that deal with matters before the CMA?

Justin Madders: I can confirm that the CMA's operational independence remains intact.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The power vested in large corporations is greater than ever. Tech giants are exerting monopolistic power over the market, so I am becoming exasperated with the Government's Thatcherite-like attitude towards deregulation. Do the Government understand the risks involved in going for short-term boosts to growth over long-term stability of the economic market?

Justin Madders: I would not accept the hon. Gentleman's characterisation at all, and I am sure that Conservative Members would not, either. We announced only this morning that we will take action against Amazon on knife sales, so I do not think the characterisation that we are in the pocket of big tech is at all accurate.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): The CMA took far too long to reach a decision on the Vodafone and Three merger. This slowed down the roll-out of 5G across all our constituencies and was a drag on growth. How can regulators be pushed to ensure that their decisions lead to growth?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is right that we need to give the business community confidence that decisions will be made quickly to provide certainty, so that it can move forward with investments for the benefit of the whole economy.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What will be the impact on growth of a record number of millionaires having left the UK since the Budget?

Justin Madders: That is a very interesting question. I am not sure that the CMA's role is to monitor the number of millionaires leaving the country.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): In 2023, after the CMA blocked a particular merger, the last Conservative Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), said that it must "understand their wider responsibilities". He also said:

"I do think it's important all our regulators understand their wider responsibilities for economic growth."

He was right, was he not?

Justin Madders: Yes, he was right. That is the message that the Prime Minister sent out to the regulators at the investment summit, and it is why they have been invited

[Justin Madders]

in to give their ideas on growth. We do not think that asking regulators how they are going to stimulate growth is a problem—that is the No. 1 mission of this Government, and everyone should be signed up to delivering on it.

Mr Speaker: I call Llinos Medi.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Diolch, Llefarydd. The Government say that the CMA's chair had failed to convince them that he was sufficiently focused on growth, but at the same time, reports suggest that the Government plan to freeze all rail spending except for on three projects in England. A lack of transport funding is stifling growth in the Welsh economy. To prove his commitment to growth, will the Minister outline the transport funding that his Government have committed to Wales?

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Unfortunately, transport funding—particularly in Wales—is well outside the CMA's remit.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK's economic regulators have a responsibility to ensure supersonic growth in our economy with a pro-business approach, and that this is part of what I would term a responsibility agenda? We all have a responsibility to ensure the best for our economy, and those regulators do as well.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We all need to be signed up to this agenda, which is absolutely critical for delivering on our aims of getting a better-growing economy, getting more money into people's pockets, delivering on the promises we have made, and changing the tune after the last 14 years of decline.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): Changing personnel is one thing, but when we speak to business, we hear that resolving disputes and the way in which the CMA does so is key. Could I urge the Minister to look at how disputes are resolved, and whether litigation and an antagonistic approach to business is the best way for the CMA to proceed?

Justin Madders: That is a very fair comment. We need to give businesses certainty and clarity that things will be resolved quickly, so that they have the confidence to make investment decisions.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): How does the Department plan to appoint the permanent chair?

Justin Madders: The appointment of the permanent chair will take place in the normal manner, as all other appointments do.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): An active regulator is essential to securing fair prices for consumers. Residents of areas such as mine are often at the forefront of rises in petrol prices, and residents of Pontardawe are regularly left wondering why they have to pay 8p more per litre than people in

nearby towns. Will the Government commit to launching the Pumpwatch petrol price comparison platform, as recommended by the Competition and Markets Authority?

Justin Madders: That is a very important point. Consumers see the petrol prices every time they leave their home in their motor vehicle. There is a disparity there that sometimes needs explanation, and certainly needs transparency, so I will take that issue up on the hon. Gentleman's behalf, and will come back to him on it.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): My constituents, particularly those living in Crookfur, have terrible mobile phone signal. How can the CMA progress the merger between Three and Vodafone, so that we get the investment in transmitters that we need to improve the mobile phone signal in Crookfur and around the country?

Justin Madders: That is certainly something that the CMA has been dealing with, and I am sure that we will be able to provide my hon. Friend with an update shortly.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will the Minister ask the Competition and Markets Authority to investigate why we have the highest energy prices in the world, particularly for electricity?

Justin Madders: I will certainly pass that request on. That might be something that Ofgem would also have an interest in.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Does he agree that the first duty of the Competition and Markets Authority is to ensure that regulations are followed, and to break up monopolies at a time when our small businesses are suffering? The national insurance increase has not helped. If the CMA takes decisions that just so happen to have the by-product of stimulating economic growth, that is well, but the narrative that taking away regulation will promote growth is wrong.

Mr Speaker: It might be worth the hon. Member putting in for an Adjournment debate.

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Member for her question. It is important that consumers and small businesses operate on a level playing field; it is also correct that we are very keen to see more growth delivered. We think that will benefit everyone in the economy, but I take the point that a balance has to be struck.

John Grady *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Mr Grady, I think you have asked a question. [Interruption.] I think the Whips need to be advising you a bit more.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. The role of the CMA chair is essential in the current economic climate, as we watch how our allies in the USA approach their trading and their deals. We need a message of strength; we need to relay the fact that we are ready and open for international business.

Does the Minister believe that this interim measure sends that message, and how quickly can we get the right person in place to promote our business standing?

Justin Madders: We are really serious about growth. This is about sending the message that we want to make sure that Britain is open for investment, and that we will work with partners across the world to encourage investment and get the growth that we want, for the benefit of the entire economy. This is just one part of the plan.

Russian Maritime Activity and UK Response

12.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): With permission, I wish to make a statement on the UK's response to recent Russian maritime activity. [*Interruption.*] I am glad that the House waited for this statement.

A foreign vessel, Yantar, is in the North sea, having passed through British waters. Let me be clear: it is a Russian spy ship, used for gathering intelligence and mapping the UK's critical underwater infrastructure. Yantar entered the UK exclusive economic zone about 45 miles off the British coast on Monday. For the past two days, the Royal Navy has deployed HMS Somerset and HMS Tyne to monitor the vessel, every minute, in our waters, and I have changed the Royal Navy's rules of engagement so that our warships can get closer and better track Yantar.

So far, the ship has complied with international rules of navigation, but this is the second time that Yantar has entered our waters in recent months. In November, the ship was also closely watched, and was detected loitering over UK critical undersea infrastructure. To deter any potential threat, I took measured steps at that time as part of a clear, direct response to the Russian vessel. Royal Air Force maritime patrol aircraft, alongside HMS Cattistock, HMS Tyne and Royal Fleet Auxiliary Proteus, were deployed to shadow Yantar's every movement. Today, I also confirm to the House that I authorised a Royal Navy submarine to surface close to Yantar—strictly as a deterrent measure—to make it clear that we had been covertly monitoring its every move. The ship then left UK waters without further loitering, and sailed down to the Mediterranean.

As colleagues will understand, I will not comment further for reasons of operational security. However, I thank all the personnel involved for their dedication and professionalism. I also want President Putin to hear this message: we see you, we know what you are doing, and we will not shy away from robust action to protect this country. With our NATO allies, we are strengthening our response to ensure that Russian ships and aircraft cannot operate in secrecy near the UK or near NATO territory.

This activity is another example of growing Russian aggression, targeting our allies abroad and us at home. The heads of MI6 and the CIA recently made a joint statement, saying that Russia is waging a “reckless campaign” of sabotage across Europe. We are seeing periodic incursions of Russian military aircraft into airspace for which we are responsible, and on Christmas day the EstLink 2 undersea cable between Finland and Estonia was damaged. Many analysts believe that that was caused by a vessel in Russia's shadow fleet.

Russia is dangerous but fundamentally weak. In Ukraine, it has suffered devastatingly high rates of casualties over three years in a war it thought it would win in a week. Compounding the humiliation, Putin has been forced to turn to North Korea to reinforce its frontline fighters. While the strategic defeat in Syria has exposed Russia's diminishing power on the global stage, at home the Russian economy faces crippling strains.

[John Healey]

Nevertheless, Russia remains the most pressing and immediate threat to Britain, and I want to assure the House and the British people that any threat will be met with strength and resolve. First, we are delivering on the foundation of security in our plan for change by making Britain secure at home. Yantar has now passed through the Dover strait and is in Dutch waters. In September, RAF Typhoons scrambled to intercept two Russian Bear F aircraft operating near the UK. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service is also playing an indispensable role in safeguarding offshore infrastructure with its multi-role ocean surveillance ship, RFA Proteus.

Secondly, we are making Britain strong abroad, working with NATO and joint expeditionary force allies. The UK activated Nordic Warden with JEF partners after the EstLink 2 cable damage. The operation is tracking potential threats to undersea infrastructure, monitoring the movements of the Russian shadow fleet and sending out real-time warnings of suspicious activity to JEF allies and to NATO. Today, I can confirm that the RAF will provide P-8 Poseidon and Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft to join the new Baltic Sentry NATO deployment to protect critical infrastructure in the Baltic sea.

Thirdly, with allies we are piling the pressure on Putin. This year, the UK will provide more financial aid in military support to Ukraine than at any time since the full-scale invasion began: £4.5 billion to deliver military support, enhance training and strengthen industrial collaboration. The UK is also leading the way in finding ways to put pressure on the Russian economy, including sanctioning more than 100 ships in the Russian shadow fleet, which is more than any other nation; working with other countries to stop the Russian military acquiring the goods, equipment and technologies it requires to continue its fight and war against Ukraine; and with allies, exposing the activities of the Russian intelligence services, expelling Russian intelligence officers and sanctioning individuals responsible for hostile activity against the UK.

Russian aggression will not be tolerated at home or in Ukraine. That is why one of the first acts of this Government was for the Prime Minister to launch the strategic defence review, why the Government have increased defence spending next year by almost £3 billion, and why we will set a path to increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP in the spring. This new era of threat demands a new era for defence. Change is essential, not optional, and the Government are determined to meet the challenge and determined to deliver for defence. We will protect the homeland and our critical national infrastructure and we will make Britain secure at home and strong abroad.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.4 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement. I am particularly grateful to him for the greater level of transparency he has chosen to show to the House on the grey zone threat from Russia. We welcome that transparency, because it is critical for our war readiness as a nation that, as far as we are able and without compromising our national and operational security,

we tell the British public the truth about the serious nature of the Russian threat and what that will inevitably mean for public expenditure on defence.

I specifically welcome the change to the Royal Navy's rules of engagement. That sends a powerful signal to Putin that we will not be intimidated and that if his aim is to keep pushing the boundaries of malign activity in our waters and those proximate to us, we will respond. I confirm that the Government will have the full backing of His Majesty's Opposition in doing so. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the Government on Ukraine and we stand shoulder to shoulder with them on deterring the wider Russian threat that he has outlined today.

I appreciate that it is unusual to go into such operational detail, including about the operational deployment of submarines. Equally, we appreciate that this is about sending the strongest possible signal to our adversaries about our clear intent to protect and defend our homeland. If I may, I have a number of specific questions about the statement and its particular contents.

A key issue here is the safety and protection of critical undersea infrastructure. Beyond the operations the Secretary of State mentioned in his speech, such as Nordic Warden, will he confirm whether he is looking to widen the number of international partners proactively involved in addressing the threat to the North sea and the Baltic? What discussions is he having to drive an internationally co-ordinated response, including through NATO?

Given our prominent role within NATO, we have a clear opportunity to lead the way in developing cutting-edge underwater technologies that address those threats directly. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he is prioritising development of underwater capabilities, such as uncrewed systems, through pillar 2 of AUKUS and also with European allies, and in particular that research and development investment into capabilities to protect critical infrastructure will be an urgent priority? Moreover, will he commit to doing everything possible to hinder the abilities of GRU operatives, including all possible action in concert with allies to restrict their ability to enter the United Kingdom?

I am very grateful to the personnel of our Navy, the Royal Fleet Auxiliary and our Air Force involved in addressing the threats. I sincerely thank them, as well as the crews of allied vessels who assisted in tracking the ship through their waters. I have one particularly important point. The Secretary of State said that "Russia is dangerous but fundamentally weak." Does he nevertheless agree that Russia's willingness to tolerate such enormous losses on the battlefield against Ukraine underlines that, in conventional military terms, it remains a formidable foe before one even considers its unconventional capabilities?

In my view, Russia remains a critical threat to the United Kingdom. For that reason, I very much welcome the Secretary of State's clear decision to be more open with the country about the threat we face. I urge him to ensure that, from the heart of Government, we have a serious grip on communicating and planning for the fact that we face the most serious nation-on-nation military threat to our homeland for generations. In turn, that means that the strategic defence review needs to be fundamentally threat-driven, prioritising homeland defence and putting the necessary resource in place.

To conclude, does the fact that we have seen the RFA, the Royal Navy, submarines, helicopters, P-8 aircraft and other assets involved in tracking Russian activity

not show the full extent of the work needed to defend our island and deter our adversaries, and ultimately why we need to increase defence spending as soon as possible? The Secretary of State said in his statement, as he did at oral questions—I welcome that—that the SDR will report in the spring. I urge him to ensure that that is in March, at the very earliest opportunity, and that we will achieve at least 2.5% spending on defence this Parliament.

John Healey: I thank the shadow Defence Secretary for welcoming the statement and the Government's greater transparency. He, like me, has confirmed that he sees Russia as the most critical threat to the UK. He has been a Defence Minister and he understands, as he acknowledges, the importance of sending the strongest possible signals to our adversaries. That is the underlying reason for the decision I have taken to make this statement today.

The shadow Secretary of State argues that our response provides the UK with an opportunity to demonstrate leadership within NATO. I think we have already done that, not by asserting our argument but by our actions: launching and leading through the JEF 10 nations the Nordic Warden response to the attack on EstLink 2 and now by confirming that we will play a leading role in the new NATO deployment in the Baltic, which is linked to the work that we are doing through Nordic Warden.

The shadow Secretary of State asks about the priority for our undersea cables for our homeland infrastructure. These cables are not simply a technical network. They are the infrastructure for the things on which we depend for our daily lives: the operation of the internet; the supply of energy; and communications with other parts of the world. He will therefore have seen and noted in the terms of reference of the strategic defence review, launched by the Prime Minister within two weeks of the Government being elected in July, that defending and reinforcing the homeland defence of Britain is foremost in those terms of reference. We will, as I have said, report on the strategic defence review in the spring.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Members are bobbing who were not in the Chamber at the start of the debate. We have made a note of all their names and the time that they arrived and they will not be called to speak. If they do not know whether that means them, they should speak to their Whip. I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. It is very apt that he should be making this statement, because during our Defence Committee visit to RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland last week, we discussed this very issue. Clearly, there is greater need for wider availability and capacity for Royal Navy and other maritime capability to meet the rising Russian activity in waters surrounding the UK. I refer, for example, to the threats to critical undersea infrastructure.

I have two questions for the Secretary of State. First, what lessons have the Government learned from the Finnish investigation into Eagle S, which was accused

of damaging the undersea infrastructure between Finland and Estonia? Secondly, what measures are available to the Government to stop vessels from traversing UK waters, to build on the recent insurance checks that were put in place in October? Is sanctioning vessels our only option?

John Healey: I thank the Chair and the members of the Defence Committee not just for the work that they are doing, but for the work that they are willing to do outside this House. I thank them for the visit that they paid to Lossiemouth to see for themselves some of the essential work that our forces personnel and civilians are doing in defending this country. He asks about the Finnish investigation into the EstLink 2 cable damage. That is for the Finns to complete and to confirm the findings of their investigation. It will be at that point that we can draw out and discuss any lessons that there might be for the UK.

We defend more fiercely than perhaps any other nation in the world the freedom of navigation in our seas. Ships of all states may navigate through our territorial waters. They are subject to the right of innocent passage, and so some of the steps that the Chair of the Defence Committee might urge the Government to take are simply not available to us under the United Nations law of the open seas. It is for that reason that we take the steps and actions that I have reported to the House—to make sure that we monitor, we watch and we track, so that those who might enter our waters with malign intent, or try to undertake any malign activity, know that we see them and know that they will face the strongest possible response.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is also important for Front Benchers to arrive on time to hear the opening statement—I believe that the Liberal Democrat spokesperson was four minutes late—and it is important for them to know that they may not be called in the future, but, on this occasion, I do invite the hon. Lady to speak.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and apologies for my lateness.

I thank the Minister for advance sight of the statement. It goes without saying that we stand shoulder to shoulder with the Government in our support for their actions against the Russian threat. We also thank all the service personnel involved in dealing with this threat.

The Liberal Democrats believe that our defence policy and conventional forces should be focused on defending British territory and playing a leading role in our immediate European neighbourhood. As such, we welcome the Government's announcement that the Royal Airforce will provide P-8 Poseidon and Rivet Joint maritime patrol and surveillance aircraft to join Baltic Sentry under NATO command.

Action to defend the realm is particularly pressing in light of recent escalations of hybrid threats from Russia. The suspected sabotage of undersea cables, including the damage to Estlink-2 on Christmas day, underscores the urgency of this moment. Such cables are the life blood of international connectivity and commerce and any attack on them is an attack on the collective stability of Europe.

[Helen Maguire]

The events involving the tanker *Eagle S* and its links to sanctioned entities supporting Putin's war machine are deeply alarming. This is not an isolated incident, but part of a broader pattern of aggression that demands robust and co-ordinated action. This Government must rebuild trust with our European neighbours. The UK's national interest and security have always been inextricably tied to that of Europe. From the second world war through to the cold war and the current war in Ukraine, our shared defence has been vital.

To that end, we urge the Government to work hand in glove with NATO countries to support Ukraine during the war and the rebuilding afterwards, including finding lawful ways to use the \$300 billion of frozen Russian state assets as reparations; sign a comprehensive security treaty with the European Union to strengthen collaborative defence; and collaborate on developing cutting-edge defence technologies and ensure interoperability with NATO allies to respond effectively in times of crisis.

We also face serious national vulnerabilities. The UK lacks land-based anti-ballistic missile systems to protect critical national infrastructure. Questions remain about the ability to secure the Greenland-UK gap.

We welcome the Government's commitment to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, but when will they outline a clear timeline for achieving that? This is not the time for complacency. The threats are clear, and the response must be decisive.

John Healey: Madam Deputy Speaker, I have some sympathy with the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire). Perhaps she, like I, thought that there would be more interest in this House in the operation of the Competition and Markets Authority than the length of the urgent question proved was the case. It may just be that I can run a little faster than her.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It gives a whole new meaning to "running to the defence".

John Healey: But Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for her support for the UK contribution to the Baltic Sentry NATO operation. We play a leading role in NATO and we will play a leading role in this operation in the Baltic. It reinforces our allies, and by doing that we reinforce our own defences and strengthen collectively the deterrence that we can, as NATO nations, offer to any future aggression and aggressive intent from President Putin.

The hon. Lady urges us to work hand in glove with allies over the support for Ukraine, which is what we are committed to do. It is why the Prime Minister was in Kyiv last week, when he confirmed the record level of funding for this year to support military aid to Ukraine and when he signed a 100-year partnership with Ukraine. Finally, he made the commitment that I think the hon. Lady is looking for, when he said that, whatever happens next, our job is to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position both on the battlefield and at any negotiating table. That is what I, as Defence Secretary, am determined to do for this country.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Putin and his autocratic friends mistake our freedom and openness for weakness, so may I enthusiastically welcome the strength of the response to the Russian activity? The Secretary of State will be aware of the reports in *Newsweek* in recent days about patents that have been filed in China for specific cable-cutting technology, presumably for military use by the Chinese. Can he reassure the House that, as well as being active in deterring Putin, the Government are taking a similarly robust stance on any attempts by China to cut the cables?

John Healey: I reassure my hon. Friend that I am aware of what he cites, and of the pace of development of many aspects of Chinese technology and equipment. Much of it may be for civilian use, but I assure him that we, with allies, are keeping a very close eye on what China is developing.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the action that he has taken, and all the work of our servicemen to combat this threat. The *Yantar* has been a well-known threat for quite a long time, but Russia has also been very capable of using private and commercial vessels to map cables and undermine our security. The reality is that we need more resources in our Royal Navy and other services. What assurance can he give the House that a bid has been put together to ensure that the Treasury properly resources him and our servicemen to do a job that we all depend on?

John Healey: Our UK servicemen and women will appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's thanks. I can give him that assurance. Most importantly, I can give him the commitment that we made to the British people at the election that the Government will increase defence spending to 2.5% of GDP—a level that Britain has not spent on defence since 2010.

Michelle Scrogham (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): Over recent years, we have seen a large increase in Russian activity of this type, and it is clear that the need for subsurface protection is critical and increasing. The UK sub fleet is built at BAE Systems in my constituency, and we play a vital role in countering this threat. Will the Secretary of State comment on the support that the Government will continue to provide to ensure that the submarine fleet continues to play this central role in the defence of our nation?

John Healey: I can indeed. I, too, am intensely proud of everything that is done, designed and developed at the Barrow shipyard. It is central to our UK security, and has been for decades. Like me, she will be proud that the Royal Navy submarine that surfaced close to the *Yantar* in November, which led to the *Yantar* heading directly off to the Mediterranean, was built in that Barrow shipyard.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State agrees that our Royal Navy and RFA are the best in the world. They need to be equipped with the vessels and crew to do their job and address threats such as those I am grateful to him for articulating. He will know that Portsmouth harbour, which Gosport sits opposite, is home to the six Type 45s that were commissioned without adequate propulsion

units. Could he update us on the T-45 power improvement programme? Will it be sufficient for T-45s to be allowed to deploy with the upcoming carrier strike group? More broadly, what is he doing as part of the SDR to ensure that a significant and sufficient proportion of our naval personnel have seagoing liability?

John Healey: I am so pleased that, alongside the Royal Navy, the hon. Lady cites the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, which plays an essential part in our maritime defence and operations. I give her that assurance on the Type 45s' participation in the carrier strike group. If she would like me to write to her in more detail about the progress on the engine upgrade programme, I will happily do so.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for such a strong statement, which makes it clear to Vladimir Putin that this aggression will not be tolerated. Recently, Ministers were kind enough to answer a series of written questions from me on quick reaction alert, subsea cables and defence of the high north, all pointing to additional threats from Russian forces and the need for a strong response. With the strategic defence review well under way, how is the Secretary of State ensuring that it is flexible in dealing with those changing and evolving threats, and that we learn from Ukraine, and from the recent example of the Finnish ship in the Baltic sea?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is one of the strongest voices recognising that the high north will become strategically much more essential. Degrees of conflict and contest are likely to grow there, particularly as climate change leads to the opening up of the northern passage. If he looks at the terms of reference of the strategic defence review, and the work of the review and challenge groups, which have been an essential part of the external leadership of it, he will see that the concerns that he raises are central to the SDR's work. When it is published, I am sure that he will find evidence that the caution he gives to the House is taken very seriously by the Government.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The activities of the Yantar may be an escalation, but this is not the first instance of such activity; it is almost two years since I first raised concerns about the activities of Russian vessels in the waters around Shetland. Events in Finland at Christmas show that Russia is prepared to go further, and we must show that we are determined to meet any challenge of that sort. This is a strategic threat for the United Kingdom as a whole, but it is particularly acute for our island communities, which rely on cables for digital and energy connectivity, quite apart from the pipelines serving the oil and gas industry. Will the Secretary of State speak to the energy companies and his colleagues in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, and ensure that our island communities are not left as a soft target for the next escalation in this business?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman is right that this is not the first instance; indeed, the total loss of digital connection that his constituency suffered in 2022 vividly demonstrated the dependency of such communities on this critical infrastructure in their everyday life, and their vulnerability to damage or sabotage. I give him the assurance that he seeks. In the consideration of the

strategic defence review, and certainly in its implementation, that is exactly the sort of question and challenge that we will meet.

Mr Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his clear statement, and for spelling out why it is so important that we protect these deep-sea cables. Something like 95% of all international data goes through them. They are the backbone of the internet. Given those facts, can he assure us that the protection of that critical infrastructure will be at the forefront of the minds of everybody completing the strategic defence review?

John Healey: My hon. Friend makes a powerful case. I certainly give him that assurance.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's candour. It is important that the country understands the threats to the nation. It is estimated that the economy would lose tens of millions of pounds per hour if there were a data loss. These cables are strategically central to our national wellbeing. With that in mind, the Government have to explain to the public why we have to keep increasing defence spending, given what the consequences would be if we did not do so. If we move above 2.5% to 3% or 3.5%, it will not be because President Trump is pushing that narrative, as many Presidents have done before him; it will be because that is the strategic requirement of Europe and NATO to head off clear acts of aggression—close to a declaration of hybrid war on NATO. It is vital that the public understand why defence spending is so important at this time.

John Healey: As a leading member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the right hon. Gentleman understands better than most in this House the concerns and perspectives of other NATO nations, and he demonstrates that this morning.

On the question of the commitment to increase defence spending, everyone agrees that defence spending must rise. The commitment that my party made going into the election well predated the result of the US election. It is a commitment that we are determined to honour. If it is the case that everyone agrees defence spending must rise to meet the increasing threats, there is certainly a lead responsibility for Government and Ministers to help explain that to the public, but I would hope that everyone who believes defence spending must rise can and will play a part in conveying that to the public as well.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Although out of sight, our offshore infrastructure is absolutely vital to the smooth running of the economy, and any disruption would have a huge impact on my constituents in North East Derbyshire—it would be truly catastrophic. Can the Secretary of State assure me that we will not take the security of that infrastructure for granted and that we will take the necessary steps to provide that security as part of the SDR?

John Healey: I very much welcome my hon. Friend's voice from landlocked North East Derbyshire recognising the fact that this is not simply a concern of maritime communities or islands, but of the whole country and for all of us in our everyday lives. High up, and with

[John Healey]

specific focus, the strategic defence review's terms of reference, point to the need to review and reinforce the defence of our British homeland. Central to that consideration, in the light of our experience in recent months, will be the rising Russian aggression and the increase in such incidents.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his profoundly important statement, which is immensely reassuring, but may I ask about pre-emption? We all know that Russia is no respecter of international law, and an over-zealous and overcautious interpretation of the legal constraints on the UK armed forces could be very destructive. Are the Government refusing to rule out pre-emptive action against a hostile ship threatening critical national infrastructure, albeit if it lies under international waters, and will he agree that an open mind on pre-emption is a stronger deterrent than ruling it out?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman has huge experience in this field, so he will recognise that I simply will not and cannot get into responding to hypotheticals. He urges me not to allow undue constraint of perhaps established practices or rules where there is a good case for flexibility. I hope he will take as a signal of the serious intent that I will bring, with the approach and return of the Yantar to UK waters, my readiness, as I have reported, to alter the permissions that the Royal Navy was using so that, should the captains of the warships that we deployed to watch and track the Yantar require it, they could go closer, see better and determine more carefully what exactly the Yantar was up to. Like the surfacing of the submarine in November, that was a move to deter and discourage the sort of activity that we simply do not want to see in our waters.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): Keeping ourselves safer at home means ensuring that Putin loses abroad, because when Putin is finished in Ukraine—whenever that may be—he will come for more. Defeating him means showing him that we have the resolve and the resource to defeat him in the future. Can the Secretary of State assure me that, as part of the SDR, we will have a way to combat, prevent and protect ourselves from Russia?

John Healey: I hope the content of my statement—the assertion that the most immediate and concerning threat to the UK comes from Russia—and the action I have taken in response to the Russian spy ship, Yantar, being in our waters again, will reassure my hon. Friend that, exactly as he urges and as the shadow Defence Secretary the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) has recognised, Russia is a serious menace. In Ukraine, it is fighting the first full-scale war in Europe since the second world war, but as the shadow Defence Secretary said, its aggression particularly in the grey zone—warned about by the heads of the CIA and M16—tells us that this is a regime intent on disruption and on disrupting our way of life. My hon. Friend is right to start by saying that the defence of the UK starts in Ukraine. If Putin prevails in Ukraine, he simply will not stop in Ukraine.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and the actions it details to intervene in Russian activity in the waters around these islands. I also commend the diligence and professionalism of those men and women in uniform in the Royal Navy, Royal Fleet Auxiliary and the RAF. He said in his statement, though, that the UK will “continue to lead the way”

on sanctions against Russia's shadow fleet, but the UK is not leading the way on sanctions, is it? A *Sky News* investigation last week found out that the Government have no record of how many investigations they are carrying out into breaches of Russian sanctions. That follows a previous investigation showing that goods, including luxury cars, fossil fuels and items that can be weapons—or whose components can be converted into weaponry—have been flowing between the UK and Russia since the beginning of Russia's war in Ukraine. Surely the Secretary of State must be concerned that inaction elsewhere in Whitehall is potentially putting men and women in uniform in the UK's armed forces at risk from Russia's malign aggression.

John Healey: I certainly do not share the hon. Gentleman's assertion. I simply say to him that I made the argument that the UK is leading the way with allies in action to deal with the Russian shadow fleet, and I confirm that we have sanctioned 100 ships—more than any other nation—that compose that loosely networked Russian shadow fleet.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement about Russia's activities, which are concerning but not surprising. I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Nordic countries. Does he agree that close co-operation with our Nordic allies is important in dealing with this threat?

Building on the comments of the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), and the broader discussion about transparency and information sharing with the United Kingdom, before Christmas every Swedish household received the pamphlet, “Om krisen eller kriget kommer”, meaning, “In case of crisis or war”. Sweden does that regularly. Is it time for us to look into that?

John Healey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the work he does on chairing the all-party group on Nordic countries in this House. One of the benefits of all Nordic countries now being part of NATO, and of the very close defence and security relationships we have with those countries, is that we can indeed learn from each other. It is not just the new approach taken before Christmas by the Swedish, but the sense that a country is stronger if its society is resilient and if societies recognise they may be under threat and are ready to respond if required. There are certainly some lessons for us in the UK as we consider the future and consider the rising level and complexity of threats we may face in the years ahead.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Last week, alongside other hon. Members and peers in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I visited the nation's flagship Prince of Wales aircraft carrier. The commanding officer Captain Will Blackett and his team

showed us the ship's capability, and we witnessed an incredible demonstration of how they can respond. But when we asked about how they would respond to ballistic missiles, or how this place and other institutions are protected from hostile states, it was a terrifying response. I realise the strategic defence review is ongoing and that there is a commitment to get to 2.5%, but with President Trump threatening to pull out of NATO, that is not enough. What plans does the Secretary of State have to go faster and to put our military retention and recruitment on a stronger footing, so that our country and infrastructure are properly protected?

John Healey: Captain Blackett and his crew were delighted that the hon. Lady and other members of the armed forces parliamentary scheme were able to go on board to be briefed and look at what an extraordinary piece of British military kit we have. The strategic defence review is set up to examine exactly the sort of points that she raises. It is designed to look at the threats we may face, the capabilities we may need, the resources available, and, in particular, the accelerated way in which the nature of warfare is changing and the central role of accelerating technology development in the changing natures both of the threat and of the capabilities that we must develop with allies to meet that threat.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If Putin's Russia is the greatest threat to peace in Europe, the second greatest threat must be any American decision to turn their back on NATO. Can the Secretary of State assure us that he will do everything in his power to convince his new counterparts in the United States Administration of the seriousness of the threat that Russia poses?

John Healey: I do not expect the new Administration to require any coaching on the threats from Russia or other parts of the world. I expect that Administration to be one who take defence and security seriously, and who recognise that a secure, free and openly trading Europe is in America's very best interests.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Secretary of State said in his statement that we are strengthening our response to ensure that Russian ships cannot operate in secrecy near UK territory. He will be aware of an occasion just over a year ago when a Russian submarine was chased from the harbour in Cork by the British Navy, because the Irish navy does not have the sonar equipment to detect potential underwater threats. Those threats affect about 97% of the world's communication and internet traffic. What communication or interaction has the Secretary of State had with the Irish Government and the Irish armed forces to strengthen our co-operation with them and ensure that the west coast of these British Isles is protected?

John Healey: We do not and will not comment on specific operational details like that. Needless to say, however, we work very closely with the Irish Government on such matters. Recently, our Chief of the Defence Staff met his counterpart from Ireland.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I commend the Defence Secretary for his statement and for the actions that he has taken—particularly to change

the rules of engagement to allow for the closer inspection of that vessel. However, he does not control all the maritime assets of this country. In December, the Transport Secretary told me that there had been no instances of the UK using its agencies to board and inspect bits of the Russian black and grey fleet. Will he speak to his colleagues across Government to ensure that we use all the arms of government and its agencies to interdict unlicensed, unregistered threats to our security?

John Healey: Where there are grounds for interdiction, the Government collectively will certainly be ready, with the appropriate agency, to take action. The right hon. Gentleman will know, having served as a distinguished Defence Minister for some years, that that sort of close co-ordination and collective action is a feature of the national security secretariat that we have at the very heart of our Government. It plays an important role and ensures that we can deal with any such threats or aggressive activity in the most appropriate way.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I thank the Defence Secretary, his team and the service personnel involved for their robust response—that is exactly the kind of thing we need when dealing with Russia. He is right when he says that the Russian army in Ukraine has nearly been destroyed, but of course the Russian navy—particularly the northern fleet, which we have to deal with in the UK—is still at strength. He has said a couple of times that Russia is the most pressing and immediate threat to the UK. In the light of those facts, does he still think it is the right decision to send the UK carrier group—which, given the Royal Navy's size, is most of its deployable force—to the far east for five months this year?

John Healey: Yes.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Undersea cables in the modern era are as vital to this country as the merchant navy convoys were in the Battle of the Atlantic in 1942, and they are equally vulnerable. Taking shape on the banks of the Clyde at the moment are the state-of-the-art Type 26 frigates, which have mission bays on board. The right hon. Gentleman is fleet of foot—as we have heard, he won a foot race today—but we are in an underwater arms race. Will he do all he can to ensure that, when those ships take to sea, their mission bays bristle with the necessary underwater equipment to take on that threat?

John Healey: Those bays are designed to be interchangeable, and they will do exactly that.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is clear that Putin is testing the west's resolve. I welcome the rigour of the statement. The threat to our underground cables is an international issue. Does the Secretary of State agree that the United Nations response has been disappointing, and that its convention on the law of the sea is wholly inadequate to deal with such subversion and, indeed, is out of date? What steps are being taken internationally to get concerted action to protect the undersea cables on which every nation depends?

John Healey: I think the problem is less with the basic rules of the sea and more with observance by states that wilfully test the limits or contravene them. That is why

[John Healey]

the actions that I have reported to the House, in the instance of the Yantar in British waters, are exactly the sort of steps that nations such as the UK will continue to take, working with allies—particularly close NATO allies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State very much for his statement. Nobody can be in any doubt whatsoever about the strength of his words on what it means for us in the United Kingdom to stand firm. We thank him for that determination and his strong voice, which we in this Chamber all support. When the naval crew of HMS Somerset were called back to their ship on Christmas day, the message was clear: the Russians do not take a holiday, but neither do our Royal Navy crews. Russia's perpetual activity in pressing towards our boundaries outlines the need for the complete preparedness of our Navy. Will the Secretary of State outline whether greater support is needed to ensure that our Navy is at full strength, given that our service fleet is now smaller than those of France and Italy?

John Healey: We are grateful to those service personnel—not just the crew of the HMS Somerset, who were, as the hon. Gentleman rightly says, mobilised on Christmas day to respond to the EstLink 2 damage, but the 10,000 servicemen and women who were deployed away from home at Christmas—for their service. We know that they do it to keep the rest of us safe, and we are very grateful.¹

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That concludes proceedings on the statement. I will give the Secretary of State a moment so that he can walk out—not run, as he did earlier on.

BILLS PRESENTED

PUBLIC AUTHORITIES (FRAUD, ERROR AND RECOVERY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Liz Kendall, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Pat McFadden, Secretary Jonathan Reynolds and Georgia Gould, presented a Bill to make provision about the prevention of fraud against public authorities and the making of erroneous payments by public authorities; about the recovery of money paid by public authorities as a result of fraud or error; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 167) with explanatory notes (Bill 167-EN).

CONSULAR ASSISTANCE (JOURNALISTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Blair McDougall, supported by Mr Alex Barros-Curtis, Rachel Blake, Mr Connor Rand, Alex Sobel, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Phil Brickell, Chris Law, Sir Iain Duncan Smith, Tom Tugendhat and Ms Marie Rimmer, presented a Bill to make provision for a right to consular assistance for British journalists abroad who have been detained or held hostage; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 7 March, and to be printed (Bill 168).

1.[Official Report, 28 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 1WC.](Correction)

Elections (Accessibility for Blind Voters)

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

1.49 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the provision of audio and tactile measures at polling stations for the purpose of enabling blind voters to vote independently and in secret; to require the Secretary of State to take steps to identify, develop and implement new accessible voting solutions for blind voters; to require the Secretary of State to undertake a review of the arrangements for postal voting in respect of accessibility for blind voters and to implement any recommendations of that review; and for connected purposes.

I first began work on this issue in the 1990s. Sadly, I am not so young for that work to have been a school project, but rather it was an excellent campaign led by the disability charity Scope, for which I had the privilege of working at that time. Scope's "Polls Apart" report on the 1997 general election shone a light on the many different ways disabled people were denied their democratic right to vote. From archaic medical approvals for postal voting to steps at polling stations, the barriers to voting—and everyday life—were and remain very real. The "Polls Apart" report that I co-authored with my colleagues Jane Enticott and Nicky Philpott, informed by the excellent campaigning work of Olivia Marks-Woldman, made a number of recommendations for reform. Indeed, the former Member for Nottingham East Mr John Heppell presented a ten-minute rule Bill—the Disability Discrimination (Provision of Voting Facilities) Bill—that sought to enact many of those recommendations.

The "Polls Apart" report found that a staggering 94% of polling stations surveyed on the day of the 1997 general election were inaccessible to disabled people who wanted to vote independently. This led to some being unable to vote entirely, while others physically injured themselves trying to open impossibly heavy doors or navigate gates designed without thought for wheelchair users—all in pursuit of trying to exercise their right to cast a vote. The report called on the Government to review the legislation for disabled people and the Home Office guidance to returning officers with a view to removing the barriers that prevented disabled people from exercising their right to vote independently and in secret—a right that has been enshrined for over 150 years, since the Ballot Act 1872.

I am proud of the work I did for Scope all those years ago, and I would genuinely love to stand before the House and tell hon. Members that all the issues we identified have been rectified. Many were, but nearly three decades on, too many remain. John from my constituency of Carlisle has glaucoma, and like many partially sighted people he had difficulty casting his vote in secret at last year's general election. With his guide dog, John headed to the polling station on 4 July, where staff escorted him to the booth and read aloud the candidates' names, because for those who cannot see a ballot paper, it is impossible to read and mark one independently. With no tactile device provided to enable John to read the ballot paper, he asked the clerk to fold it between candidates' names and used the fold creases as a guide, relying on his memory to select his preferred candidate. At first glance, this may seem like an adequate workaround, but we must ask ourselves:

why should voters with sight loss like John have to settle for a situation where they cannot guarantee the privacy or accuracy of their vote, and where solutions are available?

John's experience is not an aberration. Across the country, blind and partially sighted voters are still confronted with barriers to voting independently. The Royal National Institute of Blind People's "Turned Out" report on the 2024 general election revealed that just a quarter of blind and partially sighted people felt the current system allowed them to vote independently and in secret. The same report found that only half of blind and partially sighted people were satisfied with their voting experience, and 73% did not know they could request reasonable adjustments at their local polling station. Many blind voters struggle to get the information they need in an accessible format, forcing them to either tell another person their vote or remain disenfranchised. Blind voters report feeling humiliated and let down by the system when having to share their vote out loud in public and in some cases not being certain who they voted for.

Our democracy is all the poorer for this, and that is why this Bill seeks to ensure that all voters with sight loss are consistently able to access information about the election and candidates independently, and that when voting they can, without assistance, review the candidates on the ballot paper, reliably find and mark their chosen candidate, and be in sole control of the secrecy of their vote. This is not out of reach: the technology exists and the solutions are low-cost and effective. For example, tactile overlays placed on top of the ballot combined with an audio recording of the candidate list allow blind voters to easily navigate and mark the ballot paper with autonomy, dignity and certainty. In a recent UK trial, audio and tactile-accessible voting solutions enabled 93% of participants to vote independently and in secret. Currently, however, these modest solutions are not routinely available at our polling stations. As it is, the law puts the onus on the blind and partially sighted person to pre-book their vote by making contact with the electoral authority and requesting specific adaptations—requests that may or may not be granted. The vast majority of blind and partially sighted people do not know these provisions exist or what adaptations to request.

The barriers facing voters with sight loss also extend beyond the polling station. That is why this Bill also calls for a review of our postal voting system, which many blind voters feel pushed towards because of the inaccessibility of polling stations. However, the same issues of independence and privacy are present: 68% of blind postal voters told the RNIB they had assistance from another person to enable them to vote. One respondent told the RNIB:

"I avoid voting in person because my local polling station doesn't have a clue what to do with me. Now I use postal voting but have to rely on my partner completing my voting form so it isn't confidential, nor can I guarantee they tick the boxes I ask them to. I just have to trust them."

While voting in this country continues to rely on an inaccessible paper-based system, in Australia they have introduced a human-assisted telephone voting model, whereby a blind or partially sighted person can pre-register so that on the day of the election they can vote over the phone anonymously and in secret.

[Ms Julie Minns]

Reflecting best practice from other countries, this Bill demands a proactive and accelerated approach to tackling the barriers to voting that disabled people face. This Bill is ultimately a recognition that elections can and must be made accessible to everyone. An accessible voting system is essential for the health of our democracy, and this Bill is a vital step to correcting an injustice and building a democracy where voters such as John are not left behind. I urge the House to support this Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Ms Julie Minns, Steve Darling, Jim Shannon, Mims Davies, Neil Duncan-Jordan, Paul Davies, Liam Conlon, Katrina Murray, Irene Campbell, James Naish, Lee Pitcher and Deirdre Costigan present the Bill.

Ms Julie Minns accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 28 March, and to be printed (Bill 166).

Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill (Money)

King's recommendation signified.

2 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I beg to move,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.

The Government are of the view that the Bill is a matter for Parliament rather than the Government to decide. In order for the Public Bill Committee that is now scrutinising the Bill to consider the clause that would have spending implications, the Government must first table this money resolution. This is purely to allow the Bill to be debated in Committee, and the Government have taken the view that tabling this motion does not act against our commitment to remain neutral. Only the Government can table such motions, so tabling it allows further debate to happen. To assist that debate, the Government will also assess the impacts of the Bill, and we expect to publish the impact assessment before MPs consider the Bill on Report.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister, Dr Kieran Mullan.

2.1 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am conscious of the limited time available and so will keep my remarks focused. I appreciate that it is not commonplace for Front Benchers to speak at length on money resolutions, but this is not commonplace legislation. I reiterate that His Majesty's loyal Opposition have taken a neutral stance on the merits of the Bill, both in principle and in detail. The House has expressed its support for the introduction of assisted dying, and Members are currently considering the Bill in detail before it is presented back to the whole House for further consideration. The money resolution is a necessary part of associated legislation. Proponents of the Bill will welcome the Government bringing this forward, as it is not unheard of for Governments to withhold these resolutions in a manner that delays the progress of legislation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There are concerns from those of us who voted against the assisted dying Bill. I understand the process, and how it works with the money resolution coming forward, but on the day that this was finalised I asked a question, and the make-up of the Committee was 15 of those who voted for the Bill, and nine who voted against. A secrecy process has now been brought into the Bill, and we do not know what is happening. That is against the rules of this House. The second thing they have done is the issue of withdrawing the opinion of the judges, which is also out of order.

Dr Mullan: I hope that the hon. Member will appreciate that the money resolution is narrow in scope—I will perhaps bring the attention of the House to some tangentially related issues when it comes to the role of the Government in these proceedings.

As I said, proponents of the Bill will be glad of the progress that has been made, but this motion brings into sharp focus the fact that at some point the Government will need to fund, organise and provide assisted dying services to reflect any legislation that receives Royal Assent. As the Minister said, the money resolution will provide the legal basis for funding that service. I recognise that we are not yet at the stage when the Government can say with certainty what exactly those services and their associated funding will look like. There is time still for changes to be made, and we should not of course make an absolute assumption that any Bill will pass all its stages, as likely as that is, given the will of Parliament as expressed to date.

As the Bill proceeds, it will become increasingly important, and helpful to Members voting on future stages, to begin to have some idea of how the civil service and Ministers are envisioning enacting the legislation, not least in relation to the matter of resources before us today. The hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) estimated that up to 3% of adults may eventually choose assisted dying. In 2023 there were 577,620 adult deaths in England and Wales. If 3% of those were assisted dying cases, that would result in about 17,000 cases annually. Those are not insignificant numbers, and Members will recognise the considerable existing challenges with resources and personnel in the relevant areas of spending.

Although this is not a Government Bill, the Lord Chancellor has ultimate responsibility for ensuring the effective functioning of our legal system and judiciary, as does the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care for the delivery of this service, and how that will balance and interact with the other health services provided. I therefore have a small number of questions relating to resources, which I hope the Minister agrees will assist the House in better understanding how the Government are approaching such matters.

If information is not forthcoming today, it is crucial that the Minister sets out, in slightly more detail than he did earlier, at what point the Government will engage more fully with the detail of how they intend to resource the Bill, and start sharing their considerations. First, have the Government produced at the very least internal estimates of a potential range of the costs of delivering an assisted dying service, for both the NHS and the judiciary? If they have, will they share that with the House today? If they have not produced internal estimates, when do they anticipate doing so, and when do they intend to publish such estimates?

Secondly, have the Government identified potential sources of funding for the service? If they have, will that funding come from existing departmental budgets, or will it be allocated from outside currently allocated funding? In the latter case, where will those additional resources be drawn from? If the Government have not yet produced options for Ministers to consider on these questions, when will they do so, and when will they share them with the House?

Questions of resources relate to the impact on existing services of any decisions that the money resolution enables. The closer we come to the closing stages of the Bill, particularly ahead of any final parliamentary vote on a settled set of proposals, the more important it will be that Members get the benefit of answers to those questions, which can only come from the Government.

It is important to say that it is perfectly legitimate for Members to decide that a better understanding of these issues is not an absolute necessity, and it will be for Members to decide whether they are happy to support legislation purely on principle. That may well be the position for many Members of the House, but I think most would agree that it would be preferable to be able to vote with, at very least, possible approaches and assessments of these matters, even if not definitive answers.

In conclusion, these are not merely procedural or technical issues. The Government's tabling of this motion signals an acceptance that, should the Bill become law, the financial costs will need to be met, and that will not be a minor area of expenditure. This House has a duty to scrutinise every aspect of the Bill, and I urge the Government to provide a degree of clarity that only they can provide to assist Members in doing that. At this stage there has been a clearly expressed will of Parliament to introduce this service, and it is right for the Government to make legal provision for funding it in principle. However, the Government should enable Members to make decisions at future stages with as good an understanding as possible of how the legislation they may wish to support will translate into the real world.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Members should keep their contributions within scope. This is about the financial implications of the Bill if it is passed, so let us keep contributions within scope.

2.7 pm

Kim Leadbeater (Spen Valley) (Lab): On 29 November last year, in a debate widely described as showing Parliament at its best, this House sent the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill into Committee for scrutiny by a majority of 55. It was the clear will of this place that the Bill should be allowed to proceed, in the knowledge that Members will have further opportunities on Report and beyond to decide whether it should be enacted. For that process to continue, the resolution before us today must pass.

Those who oppose the Bill on principle—something they are absolutely entitled to do—are seeking to suggest that there is something extraordinary or improper about this process, and on that they are simply wrong. This is a standard procedure that comes before this House all the time. Without it, there can be no Bill—that, I humbly suggest, is sadly what some people intend. This is not a blank cheque, as some Members have suggested. The right time to discuss the detail of what expenditure may be required is when we know the final shape of the Bill. At that point, if Members are concerned about the expenditure required, or indeed anything else, they can of course vote as they wish.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Lady says that the right time to discuss the capacity of the judiciary and health service to deliver the Bill is presumably once it has completed its Committee stage, but should the Committee that considers the Bill have the impact assessment that allows it to scrutinise it line by line, mindful of the implications that it might have on our health service and our judiciary?

[Sir John Hayes]

Kim Leadbeater: I respect the right hon. Gentleman's question, but I would say that point is slightly out of the scope of the money resolution. However, I think it is a fair point, and I acknowledge that a lot of work is being done, as the Government said it would be, to look at the workability and operability of the Bill. I am working closely with Departments on those issues, and those conversations will continue, alongside the work of the Committee. I hope that provides him with some reassurance.

The other point is that I have never sought to stifle debate on the Bill or this really important issue; quite the contrary. I value it and I welcome it, but I do ask that it continues to be conducted in the same respectful and considered manner as on Second Reading. Where we disagree, let us do so with respect and without questioning each other's motives or integrity.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on how she has conducted this important debate. On stifling debate, does she share my hope that there will be no vote against the money resolution, because such a vote would end debate? While there was a strong vote in support of the Bill, there were many strong arguments for amendment and there was opposition. Does she agree that that debate needs to happen as the Bill proceeds and not be stifled and ended today?

Kim Leadbeater: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Having done such a powerful job of debating this issue on Second Reading, it is crucial that we continue that debate in the right manner, as Parliament voted to do. It would be wrong for anything that happens today to put a stop to that debate and those discussions.

Let us not forget that the public are watching our deliberations carefully and that the issue we are discussing means a huge amount to many people. It is extremely serious and, for many, hugely emotive. We owe it to our constituents to treat it with the seriousness it deserves. I ask Members to consider carefully what it would say about us as a Parliament if such an important debate were to be curtailed as a result of procedural manoeuvring, which, sadly, is what I worry is being attempted by some colleagues today.

The money resolution is not about the pros and cons or the detail of the Bill; it will simply allow for proper scrutiny—including of any cost involved—to continue, and mean that the Bill Committee can begin its important work. I urge Members to support the resolution.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): To ensure that as many colleagues as possible can get in during the time allowed, there will be a speaking limit of four minutes.

2.11 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) is right that this is not unprecedented; in fact, it is the normal procedure for a money resolution relating to a private Member's Bill to be debated ahead of Report. That is not true of Government Bills, as you know, Madam Deputy Speaker. However, it is really important that we examine the detail of what we are presented

with today, which is an open-ended commitment. The wording makes it absolutely clear that

"any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and...any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act",

money is so provided. The hon. Lady says that this is not a blank cheque, but it cannot get much more blank than that. Essentially, any moneys associated with the Bill—if it becomes an Act—will be provided.

Pertinent to this vote, we have to ask the question: where will that money come from? Presumably it can come only from existing resource, and one assumes palliative care; it will not come from A&E, surgical treatments or GPs, so it will presumably come from that source. One does not know, of course, but it is perfectly reasonable to ask that question.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will in a second.

On the judicial point, I simply say to the hon. Lady that the establishment of a judicial competence to deal with this system will be resource-hungry. To offer her a parallel example, when I took the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 through the House, we established what was then described as a double lock—it became a triple lock—which required a whole new judicial function to make it happen. It may well be that the same applies in this case, with immense cost and immense pressure on an already overstretched judiciary.

Therefore, in considering those precise matters—not the ethics of the Bill, which are an entirely different consideration, and highly questionable—it is absolutely right and pertinent to ask what this will cost, when, and how it will be delivered. Those questions have not been answered. I scanned the hon. Lady's speech on Second Reading, and it contained no mention of scale or cost. That is why I am immensely sceptical about what we have before us. While I accept that the money resolution is not unprecedented, it is certainly not desirable.

2.14 pm

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): A major argument in the debate on assisted dying has been about making it accessible to all, rather than only those who can afford to travel to access it. The argument is made about dignity in dying. I struggle to see the fairness, however, in pursuing spend to allow dignity in dying when we struggle to fund dignity in other areas of the NHS. I am sure that many midwives and those who have been through pregnancy and birth in recent years will agree that severely underfunded maternity services can lead to experiences completely lacking in dignity for mothers. The impact can last throughout the life of a family. In September 2024, the Care Quality Commission found that almost two thirds of inspected maternity units were unsafe to birth in.

We likewise know that the dignity offered to disabled people, those receiving palliative care and those in supported living is often far less than they deserve. One of the biggest flaws in the Bill, therefore, is the money resolution. I do not see how we can sign a blank cheque to

guarantee dignity only in death when dignity in all parts of life is still so desperately in need of resources, and equally deserving.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Maya Ellis: I will not, if that is all right. Sorry.

At the other end of the spectrum, we need to be acutely aware that we are not today expanding overall budgets in the NHS, so what we agree to in this money resolution will put further strain on our already stretched NHS. That means that, for example, St Catherine's hospice in my constituency, which already requires private fundraising for almost 80% of its income, will have further NHS funding pulled away to accommodate publicly funded assisted dying. It is prudent for us to make clear what we put at risk if we vote through the Bill, having agreed this money resolution. The resolution means that money for palliative care will likely be diminished. The House should consider that in the next stages of the Bill, given what it is supposedly designed to alleviate.

Finally, let us make it clear what we are agreeing to today. I have asked a few times, and never really got a clear answer, why making assisted dying legal has to go hand in hand with a commitment to funding assisted dying on the NHS. Most of us, including me, fiercely protect the idea of an NHS that is free at the point of use, but we risk maternity services encouraging women to pursue induced births rather than planned caesareans, partly because of resource limitations in the NHS. I caution against an agreement to spend money on guaranteeing dignity in dying when we lag so far behind on guaranteeing dignity in birth, and in many other areas.

2.17 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I rise to support the money resolution, broadly for two reasons. The first is the significant risk to the reputation of the House. One of the greatest criticisms of this place is that we play games and do not take these issues seriously. We all accept that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) said, a money resolution is normally a technicality for private Members' Bills. If the Bill fell at this moment, we would not only deny debate to those Members who expressed either soft opposition or soft support for it on Second Reading, but strike a hammer blow to millions of people in the United Kingdom who are looking to us for a sense of leadership and clarity on this issue.

I hope that there will not be a Division today, but if there is, I urge Members to vote in favour of the resolution. Those Members thinking of voting against should bear in mind that the message that would go out from this place would be that a matter of life and death—a matter fundamental to many people, and on which there are profound feelings on both sides of the debate, as we have seen—can be dismissed on the basis of a casual, technical vote on a quiet Wednesday afternoon. That would be a bit of a travesty. I hope that Members realise what is reputationally at risk.

Secondly, there is broad misunderstanding of what the Bill is designed to do. The hon. Member for Ribble

Valley (Maya Ellis) said, in effect, that the money resolution offers a blank cheque. Well, the rest of the NHS is already a blank cheque. Over the years, things have evolved in such a way that Parliament gives Government Ministers permission, through estimates, to make judgments about how they prioritise spending on the services for which they are responsible; and the Chancellor makes judgments about spending for Departments. If this House starts micromanaging spending—saying what the Government should spend on particular drugs, treatments, crimes or interventions—we will end up in an unholy mess. I have yet to hear anyone in this House object, for example, to the creation of a new criminal offence on the grounds that it would be more costly for the police. I have yet to hear anyone in this House object to the NHS prescribing a new drug because it will be costly for the health service.

We must remember that the people we are talking about—the dying individuals who may want to make this choice at the end of their life—are already receiving treatment in the national health service. They are already reliant on expensive care services, drugs and so on, as well as social support mechanisms that cost the taxpayer. It is, of course, important that we see the overall impact assessment, but we should not pretend that the status quo is cost-free, because it is costly—not only in monetary terms, but in terms of humanity. We should not forget that we are attempting to put a price on quality of life, and on mercy at the end of life. I urge Members to reflect on that and support this motion.

Finally, let me address the misunderstanding by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). There was no attempt yesterday to create any air of secrecy about consideration of the Bill in Committee. There was a brief period in which we had hoped to have an informal discussion about witnesses, before the public sitting resumed, which is normal for Bill Committees in these circumstances. Unfortunately, that has been misconstrued, but I guarantee that the rest of proceedings will be open for the public to view.

2.21 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) has led this important debate with openness and transparency at all times, and has treated all views with dignity and respect. She is acutely aware of the strongly held beliefs on both sides of this debate. Many right hon. and hon. Members expressed the concern that there was not enough time to debate the Bill. It is important to ensure the maximum amount of debate on this important Bill, and to ensure that all views are heard. The public wish to hear a considered view from all parliamentarians in this place, and we owe it to them to ensure that the debate continues, while treating each other with dignity and respect, just as we did last November, when we saw this place as its very best.

A money resolution is standard for any Bill put forward by the Government or an MP. The wording is identical to any other money resolution for any other Bill. It is important that all Members are clear that this debate is not about the merits or otherwise of the Bill, and it would be incredibly disappointing if any Member sought to use it as such.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): Does there not appear to be some confusion about the motion? It clearly says that this procedural motion has to be laid before the House

“for the purposes of any Act resulting from”

the scrutiny and debate that is to come. If hon. Members on either side of the debate, and on either side of the House, having considered the final version of the Bill, think that it should not be agreed to for monetary reasons, will not that be the time to vote no to the Bill?

Paula Barker: I will come to that point shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley has sought every opportunity to be inclusive, and has sought a wide range of views, because she knows the value of all voices being heard. If the resolution does not pass today, the Bill cannot progress. I remind right hon. and hon. Members that that is not what the House voted for in November, and it is certainly not what our constituents want.

Three full days of oral evidence from 50 witnesses will begin next week. That will be followed by at least eight full days of scrutiny. None of that will proceed if the resolution is voted down today. I appeal to Members across this place, regardless of their views, to let us have the long overdue, open and transparent debate that will enable Members to formulate a final opinion on the Bill, irrespective of what that may be. To stifle it would be to stifle democracy. We must remember that democracy is a slow process of stumbling to the right decision, instead of going straight to the wrong one.

2.24 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): Let me start by saying that I am in favour of the motion, so I will vote for it, if it comes to that. However, would the hon. Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) and the Minister consider the inclusion of two social workers on the group, made up of two GPs and a High Court judge, that assesses requests for assisted dying?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Your contribution has to be within the scope of what we are discussing, which is the financial organisation of the Bill.

Brian Mathew: I was making a point about the added expense.

Madam Deputy Speaker: You need to get to that point very quickly.

Brian Mathew: There would be added expense. Social workers are trained in understanding family dynamics, and need desperately to be involved in these situations.

Kim Leadbeater: I take that point on board. I had a very productive meeting with the Association of Palliative Care Social Workers yesterday, and we had a useful conversation on that issue.

Brian Mathew: I thank the hon. Lady.

2.26 pm

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I would like to raise a couple of practical and principled concerns

about the finances around assisted dying. First, on the practical, I welcome the comment from my hon. Friend the Minister that there will be an impact assessment in due course. However, until we see it, we have no idea what the measure will cost. We are being asked to approve a blank cheque for assisted dying. We have heard that the NHS is a blank cheque, but the NHS has a clearly defined budget. At this point, we do not have any sense of what the Bill will cost. If that were the case for any other legislation, we would be shouting about it.

The Bill represents a profound change to the very nature of our healthcare system, and we are simply guessing at the cost. That is not good for the Bill Committee's ability to scrutinise, and not good for this place, or for the democratic and legislative process. In order to legislate well, we need a firm commitment. I am glad to have heard that the impact assessment will be published before Report. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater) that the motion is routine, and I accept that. However, the consequences are extraordinary, and that is why this is an important moment.

On the principle, whatever the cost, once it is assessed, and despite the Government's recent financial boost for the hospice sector, palliative care is massively underfunded. The postcode lottery in the provision of end of life care has led to some of the horror stories that we heard on Second Reading. The hospice sector has only 30% of its funding provided by central Government, so this technical stage represents a commitment to taking potentially scarce funding from end of life care and allocating it to ending lives.

Dr Opher: Will my hon. Friend give way?

David Smith: I do not have time. That opens up the dark possibility of a race to the bottom—to looking for savings in the health and social care budget. Any Government would be tempted, where cost saving is a possibility, to push assisted dying as a cost-saving measure; we have seen that in jurisdictions such as Canada.

Finally, let me say this with humility and respect to my hon. Friends on my left. I fear that the Bill will lead to the marketisation of death and dying. We have learned from other jurisdictions that many medical services and clinicians do not want to be part of the delivery of assisted dying, for reasons of principle or because they fear that they will be sued. Independent private health organisations will have to take over to fill the space. Those businesses will have shareholders and annual reports. They will be driven by the desire to maximise profit, with death for the bottom line. They will advertise and seek to expand their market share.

Dr Opher: Will my hon. Friend give way?

David Smith: I am sorry; I am almost finished. This could seem like a tangential point to make on a money resolution, but, to summarise this and my other points, I fear the consequences of the relationship between money—this resolution in particular—and assisted dying. Although I will not be voting against this resolution, because I believe in the democratic process, I think we seriously need to consider the relationship between money and this Bill.

2.29 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Unfortunately, this debate and the circumstances of this money resolution are a manifest example of the concerns I have raised about this Bill and the process of taking it forwards. Many Members talk about debate, and it is important that this issue is debated; however, what is critical is scrutiny—ensuring that we can properly scrutinise the Bill, the work that is put into a very complicated area of law, and what would be, if the Bill were to pass, a manifest change in the relationship between the state and its citizens.

This money resolution is in the name of a Treasury Minister, the response at the Dispatch Box on Second Reading was from a Justice Minister, and we have a Health Minister here today. We cannot say whether the Bill will be paid for by the Ministry of Justice, and what the liability will be. What is the health liability? How much will be in private hands, and how much will not? What about legal aid? There are all these spin-out costs from the Bill.

As a parliamentarian, I like to scrutinise. I want to see impact assessments; I want to see what the spending that I am being asked to vote for looks like, yet we do not have that information. Members have said that the Bill will come back on Report, and the Government are in a hokey-cokey position: sort of in, sort of out—what's it all about? I am sorry, but I do not think that is good enough for something of such importance to our constituents and for Parliament to get right.

2.31 pm

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): Last summer's Labour manifesto included the words

"Fully costed, fully funded—built on a rock of fiscal responsibility", and they were words on which I was proud to be elected. Money resolutions are normally a formality, but not this one—not today. This resolution asks us to give a blank cheque to this Bill, which makes me nervous, because that sounds like something that we in this changed Labour party just do not do. When we put forward a proposal for public spending, we know how we will fund it.

Dr Opher: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Antonia Bance: No, I will not.

In the case of this Bill, we not only do not know how much it will cost or how it will be paid for, but we do not even know what the money will be spent on. Let us think of the questions that we do not know the answers to. What will be the cost of NHS doctors attending the final appointment and waiting while their patient dies? What will be the cost of a second doctor to sign off? What drugs will be used, and how much will they cost? Will assisted dying happen in hospitals, in hospices or in new, purpose-built facilities? How many will there be, and where?

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Antonia Bance: No.

How much will those facilities cost? There are even bigger questions, too. Will this be an NHS service, or will we be contracting private providers? If it is an NHS

service, which of my constituents will have to wait longer for an operation or a GP appointment because this Parliament will today authorise massive, unspecified spending in our cash-strapped NHS?

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Antonia Bance: I will not—I have only a little time.

It is not just the health system that will take on new costs. Our civil courts are groaning under the strain of years of Tory underfunding, although my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary is doing a brilliant job of putting our court system back to rights. However, this Bill will impose new unfunded and unknown costs on our courts. It blithely assumes that judges and courts will be available, yet the waiting time for a family court case at the moment is 10 months. That just will not work for the Bill. How much will the extra spending on courts cost?

Daisy Cooper: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Antonia Bance: I will not.

Those are all reasonable questions, and this House deserves to have many more answers than it has so far been able to get. According to the Hansard Society,

"To table a money motion, the Government must therefore assess how much money will be required and have some idea about where the funding will come from, although it is not required to set this out in the motion itself."

That information is not in the motion, so will Ministers make that assessment available and set out where the funding will come from? I am glad to hear we have a timetable for the impact assessment, but it would be good also to see the delegated powers memorandum, given the scale of powers delegated to Ministers in the Bill.

Alongside others, the Minister is a member of the Public Bill Committee, and I thank him and all members of the Committee for their work on behalf of this House, scrutinising and seeking wisdom. I particularly thank the Minister for upholding the neutrality of this Government and our party towards the Bill in his acts on the Committee and in this House.

Those of us with concerns will not push this resolution to a vote today. I know that colleagues are desperate for there to be procedural game playing, but there is no such thing; there are in principle concerns and questions about practicalities. I do hope for some answers to my questions.

2.35 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Can we just state what is really quite obvious? This House has voted for further debate in order to make workable and legally watertight legislation, and with that debate will come a full understanding of the resources needed for both England and Wales. Of course, in Wales, health is devolved and justice is reserved, and we need to understand the implications for that.

What has been a bit of an eye-opener for me, as a member of the Bill Committee—it is, of course, a larger Bill Committee for a private Member's Bill than ever before—is the sense of the way in which this place operates. We have been given the role of producing

[Liz Saville Roberts]

workable legislation as best we can, on the advice of witnesses—there is a part of me that would like the Committee to receive more witnesses, but I am very aware that we have to move ahead with what we have been charged with doing: namely, producing that workable legislation—but we will not arrive today, next week or after we have heard from our witnesses at a complete, perfect, already-made understanding of what we need to do to make correct and workable legislation. For those things to be in place today, the House would need estimates and information that the Bill Committee has been charged with providing, which it will not be able to provide until we have heard the advice from the witnesses we are calling forward to give us a sense of what the resource needs and associated costs will be.

It will then be the duty of us all on Report and on Third Reading to ensure that the money and resources are sufficient for the legislation to be workable. With that in mind, I support this motion.

Daisy Cooper: Members in this House who have spoken against the money resolution say they are doing so because they have so many unanswered questions about the costs. Does the right hon. Lady agree that if Members vote against the resolution, they will never get those answers? That is precisely why the Bill should move forwards.

Liz Saville Roberts: Let us imagine what the public would make of our role in this place if this legislation were to fall at this point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We are going to drop the speech limit to three minutes.

2.37 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Colleagues will know that I put forward a reasoned amendment on Second Reading. In that amendment, and in my speech in that debate, I set out some of my concerns about how the private Member's Bill process does not allow for sufficient scrutiny to develop complex legislation on such a sensitive matter. Indeed, such a once-in-a-generation approach to suicide, death and dying and these changes need to be looked at independently and in a formal public consultation.

This House was given reassurances, both by the promoter of the Bill, my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), and the Leader of the House, in the light of which some colleagues voted for the Bill on Second Reading to allow the process to proceed. As part of that, reassurances were given about an impact assessment, which would have included an estimate of costs. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Minister has given assurances that an impact assessment is forthcoming, but we do not yet have it. As a result, we are very unclear at this point how much assisted dying would cost to implement.

I therefore seek clarification from the Minister and others involved on a number of questions. Will assisted dying be offered free on the NHS? How many people do we estimate will expect to exercise their right under the Bill? There are a wide range of estimates out there, based on overseas jurisdictions.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Anna Dixon: No; I have very little time.

How much will it cost for the additional doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals? How much time will be required to do a proper consultation? What about the lengthy paperwork? Will new clinics be set up, or will existing facilities be repurposed? What will be the costs of the lethal drugs? What about the oversight by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and other regulators? What about the training for healthcare professionals involved in the process, and the cost of oversight by the chief medical officer and the Registrar General, and any new data systems required?

It is clear that palliative and end of life care is in desperate need of investment; some 100,000 people die each year who could benefit from end of life care but do not receive it. If assisted dying is to be implemented, it is essential that there is equitable and free access to hospice care, so how much additional funding would be provided to hospices for palliative and end of life care under this money resolution or from elsewhere?

I fully support this Government's commitment to fixing the NHS, establishing a national care service and providing additional investment, as they have already shown, to hospices. However, I would like the Minister to provide clarification to assist our understanding because, given our inheritance from the Conservative party, I am concerned like others that funding for assisted dying risks diverting essential resources away from end of life care, other NHS services and social care. I look forward to the Minister's response.

2.40 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): There is no more important function for Members of this House than that of being the guardians of public money. It is very hard to equate the performance of that function with signing a blank cheque, and yet that is what we are being asked to do today. One thing is abundantly clear: if this Bill passes, it will bring with it a huge financial burden in perpetuity.

Lewis Atkinson: On that point, will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Allister: I would be happy to do so in a moment.

It is quite clear that the measures will impose huge costs on the health and justice budgets. Given the provisions in the Bill, is it impossible for that not to be the consequence, so when the Treasury Minister produces the financial information, will he include current Government expenditure on palliative care and suicide prevention, so that we can look at and balance what we are spending? The Bill invites the Government to move from funding charities to prevent suicide to becoming facilitators and providers of suicide.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Allister, we must confine our remarks to the money resolution for the Bill.

Jim Allister: Madam Deputy Speaker, I was seeking to do that by asking the Treasury Minister to give us a

comparison. What is this Bill going to cost our health service and justice system? How does that compare with what we are already spending on palliative care and suicide prevention? Those are pertinent questions and we need the answers.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is mind-blowing that there is no money to pay for winter fuel payments or to support the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign, yet the House is about to approve the provision of a bottomless pot of money to create a state-funded, gold-plated assisted suicide service.

Jim Allister: I agree. We all have our views on the merits of the Bill, but fundamentally we have a duty to our constituents to handle public money properly. In handling that money, we must know how much the Bill will cost. When it comes to that financial statement, it must not be fudged or opaque; it must be absolutely clear and it must—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I must now call the Minister.

2.44 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I thank Members for their continued contribution to the debate. The Government are of the view that the Bill is an issue of conscience for individual parliamentarians and it is rightly a matter for Parliament, not the Government, to decide. The money resolution allows the Bill to be debated in Committee, where its detail will continue to be scrutinised. As I have said, the Government will also be assessing the impact of the Bill and we expect to publish an impact assessment before MPs consider the Bill on Report. I therefore commend the money resolution to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) made a

comment that I feel impinged upon my integrity. I have spoken to the right hon. Gentleman and he knows what I am referring to. I underlined and highlighted that the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill Committee went into private session; some 15 Members, who support the Bill, voted for the private session and nine Members, who oppose the Bill, voted against the private session. The record must be corrected about what the right hon. Gentleman said about the comments I made about that. Facts are facts; they matter to me, as does my integrity.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Thank you, Mr Shannon, for letting me know you would be making a point of order. The Chair is not responsible for the content of Member's speeches, but I remind the House of the advice in Erskine May on the importance of good temper and moderation in parliamentary language.

Kit Malthouse: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. There was no intent in my remarks to undermine the integrity of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I may have misunderstood his remarks, but he implied that the Committee was adopting some kind of veil of secrecy over our affairs and I was pointing out to him that, in my view, that was a misunderstanding of what we were attempting to do yesterday. I am sorry if the hon. Gentleman was offended, as he knows I hold him in great affection and I had no intention to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Mr Malthouse. I can see Mr Shannon nodding, so hopefully your apology has been accepted.

Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

2.47 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill will enhance the UK's resolution regime by giving the Bank of England a more flexible toolkit to respond to bank failures. The Bill creates a recapitalisation mechanism that ensures that certain costs of managing the failure of banking institutions do not fall to the taxpayer. It strengthens protections for public funds and financial stability, while supporting the competitiveness and growth of the UK financial sector by avoiding placing new up-front costs on the banking sector. It is therefore an important Bill that underpins this Government's vision to promote growth and economic stability.

The policy in the Bill builds on the proposals set out in consultation by the previous Government. I thank the previous Government—I do not always do that, by the way—for the work they did with the Bank of England on the consultation and on the resolution of Silicon Valley Bank UK, back in March 2023. The Bill provides the Bank of England with greater flexibility to manage the failure of small banks, and thereby embeds lessons learned from the volatility in the UK banking sector in 2023, notably that arising from the failure of SVB UK. I hope, given their origins, that these proposals will be welcomed by hon. Members from across the House.

The resolution regime was created by the Banking Act 2009 in the wake of the global financial crisis. It provides the Bank of England with a set of tools to manage the failure of financial institutions in a way that limits risks to financial stability, public funds and the UK economy. The regime was introduced in recognition of the global consensus that reforms were needed to end “too big to fail” and to ensure that, where necessary, financial institutions can be supported to fail in an orderly fashion. This regime has been developed and steadily added to by a series of successive governments over the past decade. That work has given the UK a robust regime that reflects relevant international standards and supports the UK's role and reputation as a leader in financial regulation, enhancing confidence in our financial system and making the UK a more secure and attractive place in which to invest.

The resolution regime was last used to resolve Silicon Valley Bank UK, the UK subsidiary of the US firm that collapsed in March 2023. The Bank of England used its transfer powers under the Banking Act 2009 to effect the sale of Silicon Valley Bank UK to HSBC. That delivered good outcomes for financial stability, customers and taxpayers. All the bank's customers were able to continue accessing their bank accounts and other facilities, and all deposits remained safe, secure and accessible. The Bank of England achieved the continuity of banking services, and maintained public confidence in the stability of the UK financial system.

The case of Silicon Valley Bank UK demonstrated the effectiveness and robustness of the resolution regime. However, as would be appropriate following any bank

failure, the Treasury, the Bank of England and their international counterparts reflected carefully following this period of banking sector volatility, and following that reflection, the Government concluded that there was a case for a targeted enhancement to give the Bank of England greater flexibility to manage the failure of smaller banks such as Silicon Valley Bank UK.

At this point, I should explain that the Bank of England generally expects to place failing small banks into insolvency under the bank insolvency procedure, because their failures are not generally expected to meet the conditions that must be satisfied for the Bank of England to exercise its resolution powers. One of those conditions is that winding up the bank would not achieve the resolution objectives to the same extent as they would be achieved through the use of the resolution powers. Those objectives include protecting UK financial stability, covered depositors and public funds. When a failing firm enters insolvency, its eligible depositors are paid out up to £85,000 each within seven days by the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, with higher limits for temporary high balances. This compensation is funded initially through a levy on the banking sector, and then, to the extent possible, recovered from the estate of the failed firm.

As was seen in the case of the Silicon Valley Bank, it is the Government's view that in some cases of small bank failure, the public interest and resolution objectives are better served by the use of the resolution powers than by placing the firm into insolvency. Smaller banks are not required to hold additional funds and liabilities that could be bailed in during a resolution, so in a case in which a small bank does need to be resolved, additional capital may be required to support a successful resolution. For example, funds may be required for the bank in resolution to meet the minimum capital requirements for authorisation, or to sustain market confidence. At present, these recapitalisation costs have to be borne by public funds. The Government believe that that situation should be avoided to protect taxpayers from bearing those costs, and I hope that the Opposition agree; we shall see very shortly. To that end, the Bill aims to strengthen the protections for public funds when a small bank is placed into resolution.

Overall, this is a prudent set of reforms to ensure that the resolution regime continues to effectively limit risks to financial stability and, indeed, to taxpayers. The Bill does not make widespread changes to a regime that is working well, and it is important to emphasise that the bank insolvency procedure will continue to play an important role in managing the failure of small banks. That said, the Bill reflects the Government's belief that a targeted set of changes is needed to ensure that, if necessary, existing resolution powers can be applied to small banks to achieve good outcomes for financial stability, while also protecting taxpayers. It achieves that by introducing a new recapitalisation mechanism, which allows the Bank of England to use funds provided by the banking sector to cover certain costs associated with resolving a failing banking institution.

The Bill does four main things. First, it expands the statutory functions of the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, giving the Bank of England the power to require the FSCS to provide it with funds to be used to support the resolution of a failing bank. Secondly, it allows the FSCS to recover the funds provided to the

Bank by charging levies on the banking sector. This mirrors the arrangements for funding payouts to covered depositors in insolvency, with the exception of the treatment of credit unions, to which I will return. Thirdly, the Bill gives the Bank of England an express ability to require a bank in resolution to issue new shares, facilitating the use of industry funds to meet a failing bank's recapitalisation costs. Finally, following constructive debate in the other place, the Bill sets out a number of accountability measures that apply when the Bank of England uses the recapitalisation mechanism.

The Bill consists of eight clauses to deliver those key components. Clause 1 inserts a new section into the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, which introduces the new mechanism. It allows the Bank of England to require the Financial Services Compensation Scheme to provide the Bank with funds when using its resolution powers to transfer a failing firm to a private sector purchaser or bridge bank. It sets out what these funds can be used for, namely to cover the costs of recapitalising the firm and the expenses of the Bank of England or "relevant persons" in taking the resolution action. "Relevant persons", for this purpose, means the Treasury, or a bridge bank or asset management vehicle operated by the Bank of England. The clause also allows the Financial Services Compensation Scheme to recover the funds provided through levies.

Clause 2 sets out the reporting requirements for the Bank of England when it uses the recapitalisation mechanism, added to the Bill by the Government in the other place. The Bank must report to the Chancellor on the use of the recapitalisation mechanism and the stabilisation option that it was used in connection with. The Treasury can specify the content and timing of these reports, although if a final report is not produced within three months, the Bank of England must produce an interim report within that three-month period. The Chancellor must lay all reports before Parliament, although the clause allows discretion to omit any information that it would not be in the public interest to publish.

Clause 3, added by the Government in the other place, requires the Bank of England to notify the Chairs of the relevant parliamentary Committees in this House and the other place—the Treasury Committee in the House of Commons, and the Financial Services Regulations Committee in the House of Lords—as soon as reasonably practicable after using the mechanism. Clause 4 requires the Bank of England to reimburse the Financial Services Compensation Scheme for any funds it provides that were not needed. Clause 5, also added by the Government in the other place, states that the Treasury must include guidance on the contents of reports on use of the mechanism in the code of practice, a statutory document that the Treasury must publish and to which the Bank of England must have regard, which explains how the resolution regime is intended to work in practice.

Clauses 6 and 7 make several consequential amendments to reflect the introduction of the new mechanism. Clause 6 primarily ensures that existing provisions relating to the Financial Services Compensation Scheme apply to the new mechanism in the same way. The most substantive provision specifies that the FSCS cannot levy credit unions to recoup funds provided under this mechanism, and was added to the Bill before its introduction to Parliament in response to valid concerns raised by industry. In clause 7, which contains mostly technical consequential amendments, the most substantive change

gives the Bank of England the power to require a failing firm to issue new shares. That will make it easier for the Bank of England to use the funds provided by the FSCS to recapitalise the firm, by using the funds to buy the new shares. Clause 8 deals with procedural matters, including the provision that the Treasury may make regulations to commence the provisions in the Bill. I am grateful to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury for shepherding the Bill through its successful passage in the other place. As I have mentioned, the Government made a number of amendments to the Bill in the other place following constructive debate, feedback and engagement. They include the insertion of the requirements for the Bank of England to report to the Treasury and notify parliamentary committees. The Government also amended the Bill to ensure that there was clarity over whose expenses could be covered by funds provided through the mechanism. In addition, the Government published a number of important documents during the early stages of the Bill's passage, including a draft update to their code of practice setting out how the mechanism is expected to be used in practice.

There remains one area of the Bill that will require the attention of this House, namely the question of the scope of the mechanism—that is, which firms the Bank of England can use the mechanism on to support their failure. This was heavily debated in the other place, and reflects concerns about the risk of the mechanism being used on a wide range of firms, with the potential for large levies as a consequence. Those concerns led to an amendment to the Bill, intended to exclude from the scope of the mechanism those banks that already hold the full set of equity and debt resources—the so-called MREL, or minimum requirement for own funds and eligible liabilities—necessary to manage their own failure. The intent was to limit the scope to banks that are not required to hold additional capital resources, or banks that have not yet raised the full amount of additional resources to fully support their own failure. As I have alluded to, the Government note and appreciate the concerns being raised on this point, but as the Financial Secretary to the Treasury made clear during the Bill's passage in the other place, the Government are clear that this Bill is primarily intended for smaller banks. My predecessor made a written statement to the House on 15 October to reiterate this policy position.

However, after careful reflection, the Government continue to believe that some flexibility should remain in the legislation on this point, in order to avoid constraining the Bank of England's ability to use the mechanism in a highly uncertain crisis scenario. Narrowing the scope would constrain the Bank of England's optionality, particularly where it might be necessary to supplement the bail-in of a firm's own resources with additional capital resources. I note that this is considered an unlikely outcome, rather than a central case. Nevertheless, the Government consider it important to avoid constraining that optionality, given that the alternative may be to use public funds. Ultimately, we want to protect the taxpayer. The Government will therefore table an amendment in Committee to remove the constraint on the scope of the application of the new mechanism.

More broadly, I want to express my gratitude to the banking sector, with which the Government have engaged proactively and constructively both before and since the Bill was introduced. The Government appreciate the feedback from industry, and we have reflected on it

[Emma Reynolds]

carefully to ensure that the Bill delivers a proportionate reform. As alluded to earlier, in response to feedback from industry, the Government carved out credit unions from levy contributions to recoup funds provided by the financial services compensation scheme under the recapitalisation mechanism. That was deemed appropriate because credit unions are out of scope of the resolution powers. It would therefore be disproportionate to require them to contribute towards costs under the mechanism.

The Government have also sought to provide reassurances to industry on the impact of this Bill. For example, by modelling the mechanism on the existing funding framework for depositor payouts, industry will be liable to pay levies only after the point of failure, avoiding new up-front costs to firms. Alongside the Bill, the Government also published a cost-benefit analysis that sets out our general expectation that lifetime costs for levy payers will generally be lower under the mechanism outlined in the Bill, compared with insolvency. I note again the draft updates to the code of practice, which the Government have published to provide additional transparency to industry and Parliament on how the mechanism is expected to be used in practice.

Adam Jodge (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am enjoying listening to the Minister's speech, and I am learning quite a lot. Will she do me and the House a favour by sharing her thoughts on how I can best describe the benefits of this Bill to the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme when I go home tonight? I am sure she knows far better than me.

Emma Reynolds: My hon. Friend flatters me. It is not that easy to explain in simple terms, but I will do my best. Essentially, if a small bank is in trouble, it is better for it not to go into insolvency but instead to go through resolution to protect its depositors. In the case of SVB, only 14% of deposits were covered by the financial services compensation scheme, because the scheme only covers deposits up to the £85,000 threshold. Had public funds been required to facilitate the sale of SVB to another purchaser—in this case it was HSBC, but it could have been another institution—it would have had recourse to public funds. We are seeking to avoid a situation in which taxpayers in all our constituencies are on the hook for the failures of small banks. Where a bank has high-quality assets, which was the case for SVB, we can avoid the insolvency situation and pay out to depositors who have deposits above the £85,000 threshold. That resolution would be funded by the financial services compensation scheme and ultimately the banks, which contribute to the scheme through a levy. I hope that answer helps my hon. Friend—I am sorry that it was a bit long.

Stability is at the heart of the Government's agenda for economic growth, because when we do not have economic and financial stability, it is working people who pay the price. We have to bear in mind what we are seeking to do, which is ultimately to protect the interests of the taxpayer and to ensure that we do not have to have recourse to public funds.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I welcome this Bill, but can the Minister assure the House that, at all times, the aim of the Government is to minimise the

liability of the taxpayer? Where losses have to be sustained, they should be borne first by the shareholders, secondly by the bondholders and perhaps thirdly, and regretfully, by the deposit holders. That should be the order in which losses are sustained.

Emma Reynolds: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, who puts it very well. He will know that there was a different order in the case of Credit Suisse, but the then Government said at the time that that would not be their order of priority. We are seeking to protect the taxpayer in this Bill, and he is right: had there been a cost associated with the transfer of SVB, it would have fallen first to those people before falling to the taxpayer. If we pass this legislation, for which I hope there is cross-party support, we will avoid that eventuality, because if we follow the order of priority and get to the financial services compensation scheme, the cost will be paid through a levy on the banks in that scheme. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question.

The resolution regime is a critical source of stability when banks fail, because it ensures that public funds and taxpayer money are protected. This Bill delivers a proportionate and targeted enhancement to the resolution regime to ensure that it continues to provide that important stability. As I said at the start of this debate, it is therefore an important Bill that underpins the Government's vision for economic growth, and I commend it to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

3.6 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I welcome the new Minister to her place. I think this is her first Bill that she has taken through as Economic Secretary and, interestingly, she is absolutely right. This is one of the frequent occasions on which we will agree on pretty much everything. This Bill was obviously written by the previous Government who, I think we all agree, delivered 14 years of strong and stable government.

Broadly speaking, we will not disagree on this Bill. As the Minister set out in her opening speech, this legislation was born out of the learnings of the failure of Silicon Valley Bank. The failure came out of the US parent company, with a contagion that quickly spread to its UK subsidiary. Although the Bank of England had initially planned to use insolvency procedures, HSBC emerged as a buyer thanks to the tireless work over the course of a weekend in March 2023, and much credit must be given to the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), and the former Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith). They secured an outcome that has not cost the taxpayer any money at all, and which protected millions of pounds' worth of customer deposits, primarily in the tech sector. The bank's customers would face an uncertain financial future were it not for that intervention, so I am sure that the House will join me in commending the action that was taken by the previous Government.

The failure and subsequent transfer of Silicon Valley Bank UK shows how robust our post-2009 banking reforms have become. The Bank of England has used its resolution powers only three times since 2009, and this

was the first time since the Southsea Mortgage and Investment Company failed in 2011. It is fair to say that the process worked absolutely as it should have done: the transfer of Silicon Valley Bank UK to HSBC was done in an orderly manner, there was no wider contagion in the banking sector, and withdrawals and panic did not spread to other banks. In short, it demonstrated why the UK is such a financial centre of excellence, and we must continue to champion that point.

However, we can continue to uphold our world-leading reputation only if we review and learn from when the system is stressed in real life. In some ways, we were very fortunate. HSBC was the only credible bidder for Silicon Valley Bank that did not require financial support or guarantees from the Government or the Bank of England. In addition, HSBC's level of capital and liquidity resources greatly reduced the risk to public funds, delivered stability and boosted market confidence. However, had HSBC not come forward, the only option for the Bank of England was the bank insolvency procedure. This Bill comes out of the subsequent root-and-branch review, and it went for industry consultation under the previous Government. I thank the current Government for supporting it.

The Opposition recognise that some banks may fail due to issues outside their control and should have pathways to continue as a going concern if transferred to another entity, and it is right that the Bank of England has more tools in its arsenal to support the financial system. We are therefore delighted to support the Bill—it is one that we started. As it made progress in the other House, it benefited from considerable scrutiny from noble peers. The successful amendments and new clauses enhanced the Bill and will significantly improve transparency.

This was a point addressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) during the Delegated Legislation Committee on Monday, which finalised the transfer of Silicon Valley Bank UK to HSBC with no compensation to shareholders. He rightly raised some of the unanswered questions on what changed the Bank of England's decision between announcing that the Silicon Valley Bank UK was going into insolvency procedures on the Friday and being transferred under resolution by the Monday. These additional transparency arrangements will ensure that colleagues in this House remain confident in the independence of the Bank of England. Will the Minister confirm that the Government intend to support those amendments in this House? I would be amazed if he said no, actually.

I will move on to what could be the crux of any potential disagreement. When this Bill was introduced in the other place, there was no limit to the scope of this regime. We can safely categorise our banks into three different groups. First, there are the large-scale institutional banks that have reached the end-state minimum requirement for own funds and eligible liabilities, or MREL, as it is known. Secondly, there are the challenger banks such as Monzo and Starling that are working towards end-state MREL. Finally, there are the smaller banks that do not meet the threshold for MREL, such as Silicon Valley Bank.

The Banking Act 2009 provides a robust framework for dealing with banks that have achieved end-state MREL status, and while there is a sensible argument for

saying the new mechanism could provide top-up funding for banks working towards end-state MREL, it is not fair or reasonable to expect the mechanism to be used for the largest banks. The consequences of such a decision could be extremely costly for banks and their customers, and if an institutional bank failed and this mechanism were used to facilitate a transfer, our fear is that there could be a recapitalisation requirement that was many times the annual cap of the financial services compensation scheme. The only decision left to the FSCS would therefore be to borrow from the national loans fund via the Treasury. The ex-post levy set out in this legislation would therefore be charged not only in the year in which the levy was first implemented but potentially for many years thereafter. MREL requirements should ensure the safety of our largest institutions. Bank directors should be ensuring sound compliance of MREL, not taking comfort in the fact that they can fall back on to an ex-post levy of the banking sector in times of trouble.

The Opposition took reassurance from a policy statement that the mechanism would be used for the largest banks only in exceptional circumstances. However, this still left the key question as to why the legislation allowed large-scale banks to trigger the mechanism. In her opening speech, the Minister referred exactly to this. Baroness Vere's amendment makes it clear that this mechanism cannot be used on the largest banks—those that have achieved end-state MREL. That amendment was opposed by the Government in the other place. I was hoping that the Minister would update the House today on the Government position and she has done that, but we may want to talk about this at greater length. Concerns were also rightly raised by peers that this mechanism, and using resolution to transfer failing banks, should not become the default position of the Bank of England, which is important.

Ultimately, banks are businesses. They have shareholders that bear the responsibility and the burden of risk, and we should not create a system where banks can always expect to fall back on industry-funded life support. The code of practice, alongside this Bill, rightly states that using the insolvency procedure should be the default position. I would welcome the Minister's comments on whether there could be further need for that to be strengthened in the legislation.

The introduction of this mechanism is another example of a banking industry in strong health. In 2007, it was the taxpayer bailing out the banks. Now we have a system whereby the industry is expected to cover the cost of a failing bank. This raises questions as to whether the Government need to review how we can make the UK banking sector more internationally competitive—we have had an informal chat about this.

Let us take the bank levy as an example. It was introduced for three main reasons. First, it was introduced to help repay the cost of the banking bail-out, and it has raised something in the region of £25 billion since it was first introduced. Second, the bank levy acted as a kind of insurance premium in case the post-financial crisis stability of the banking sector were to falter and fall and there needed to be another bail-out. Finally, it was almost a quasi-punishment to the banking system for the failures that led to the financial crisis. It was there to reassure unhappy shareholders that there were consequences for a sector in which there was bad practice.

[Mark Garnier]

If we add up the total cost to the UK taxpayer of the financial crisis, it was £137 billion, according to the House of Commons Library, as of 2023. That has been reduced to £33 billion now, so there still is some outstanding cost.

On top of the bank levy, other post-2009 reforms include much more stringent ringfencing and capital requirements. That might not be a subject for this debate, and I am not calling for the bank levy to be abolished, but I would certainly welcome the Minister's comments on whether there could be scope to review the international competitiveness of the banking sector alongside the Chancellor's growth agenda. The international competitiveness of the City of London should be an absolute priority for this Government—I believe that it is—yet according to UK Finance's 2024 banking sector tax report, produced by PwC, UK banks face the highest tax contribution since the study started a decade ago.

In terms of international competitiveness, according to PwC, the total tax burden of a model bank operating in the UK is currently 45.8%. That is significantly higher than our competitors in Frankfurt at 38.6%, in New York at 27.9%, or in Dublin at 28.8%. The City, as I am sure Ministers and the whole House will agree, is an extraordinary asset for this country. For a Government who are seeking a growth agenda, the City is the oil in the engine of that economic growth.

Banks do a very important job, and it is a job of significant social and economic importance. Banks take money from where it has accumulated and distribute it to where it is needed for investment. This is crucial to fairness across our economy and delivering growth. They transfer overnight deposits into 25-year mortgages that provide hope and opportunity for people to bring up their families in safety. So we should not demonise banks, and we must remember that shareholder returns on bank investments are as important as shareholder liability in the event of a failure. We must ensure that there is a good return, given the fact that bank shareholders bear the ultimate risk of losing everything.

This Bill is a shining example of the fact that the banks and regulators are now in a position to keep their industry in order. As I said at the start of this speech, I believe that there is cross-party support for the Bill, and I look forward to working with the Government as these reforms progress through the House. They are magnificent, because of course they came from the previous Government, but I thank the Ministers for continuing with them in the spirit with which they were intended.

3.17 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I would like to start by welcoming both the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds), and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), to their new positions. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West and I go way back, and I am enjoying now being able to address him as a Minister in His Majesty's Government. I congratulate both of them. I did not quite agree with the shadow Minister's description of the previous Government as "strong and stable", but it was certainly worth a try—I mean that in all good spirit, honestly!

I thank the Minister for her speech and for her thorough but accessible explanation of the reach of the Bill. I shall look forward to talking about it with the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme tomorrow on the doorsteps of Town ward, where there is a by-election, which I look forward to the Labour candidate, Sheelagh Casey-Hulme, winning. I will make sure that I share the benefits of this Bill with the voters in my constituency when I knock on their doors tomorrow. This Bill has the good fortune of being supported by both sides of the House. We have heard that from the shadow Minister, so I want to reassure all colleagues that I shall speak very briefly indeed.

I have never received an invitation for a prawn cocktail in the City—although all good things come to those who wait—but the Bill and the issues contained in it are important and I am pleased to be here to speak in favour of them today. I have just a couple of points that I would like the Minister to touch on in his winding-up speech. Could he set out in greater detail how the payslips of workers in Newcastle-under-Lyme will be protected by the contents of the Bill? My constituents' finances and livelihoods are obviously my focus, so I welcome anything and everything this Government do to protect and enhance their lives, or to promote growth across the economy. I would welcome anything the Minister can do to provide reassurance both on the growth agenda generally and on the specific benefits of the Bill.

Ahead of this debate, like all keen newbies, I read the *Hansard* report of the debate in the other place, and I hope Ministers have ensured that the legitimate points raised by the noble Lords were taken on board. I agree with the noble Lord who noted that small banks play a big role in our economy, and I thank the Economic Secretary and the shadow Minister for acknowledging that.

I echo the shadow Minister's point about the importance of the City, which is an engine of growth that reflects the success of our country and the strength of our economy. However, my focus as the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme is on ensuring that the growth, benefit and skill of that powerful engine reach up the M6 to junction 15, so that my constituents in God's own county of Staffordshire can benefit from all that the City does.

This is a technical but important Bill, and I am pleased to be here today to give it my support.

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

3.20 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): All of our constituents are still feeling the cost of living crisis very acutely, and mortgage holders are still suffering from the misery of the mini-Budget, so the very last thing that taxpayers want to worry about is whether public money will be used to bail out banks that have gone bust. That is why we Liberal Democrats are broadly supportive of the Bill, which we hope will make sure that taxpayers do not have to do so.

A number of improvements were made to the Bill in the other place, as the Economic Secretary alluded to, and we welcome the improved requirements on reporting and accountability. However, as she and the shadow

Minister acknowledged, there was a point of contention on the Bill's scope. Liberal Democrats in the other place supported the successful Opposition amendment to prevent the Bank of England from using this mechanism, which is meant for smaller banks, to support bigger banks that are signed up to a different scheme.

The Economic Secretary said that an updated code of practice has been produced, but it is disappointing to hear that Ministers intend to table an amendment in Committee to try to delete the Lords amendment from the Bill. The Economic Secretary suggested that the purpose of keeping it in the code of practice, rather than on the face of the Bill, is to ensure flexibility in a time of crisis.

I invite the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), to say a word or two about that in summing up, because it strikes me that if this is not on the face of the Bill, it could create uncertainty rather than provide flexibility in a time of crisis. There is a danger that even the suggestion that this mechanism could be used to support a bigger bank could cause chaos, confusion and instability. I encourage Ministers to think again and to ensure that the restriction on the Bill's scope remains on the face of the Bill.

The Liberal Democrats tabled a further amendment in the other place that sought to create a secondary objective for the Bank of England to consider the competitiveness and growth of the market before directing the recapitalisation of failing small banks through this levy. In effect, the amendment was designed to protect against unintended consequences. Obviously, it could be a catastrophe if the Bank of England were required to rescue one small bank, even if that act may put others in jeopardy. The intention behind the amendment was to protect against the systemic collapse of the banking system. Will the Minister set out the Government's objections to that amendment? Can the Government provide assurances about alternative protections that could be put in place to achieve the same goal of protecting against unintended consequences?

3.24 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have no desire to detain the House for long, but I have some questions that I hope the Economic Secretary can address, continuing our conversation in the Delegated Legislation Committee earlier this week.

The Economic Secretary and I are both alumni of TheCityUK, so she will know that what financial services want most of all is certainty of regulation and decision making. They need to know that the playing field is level and predictable. While we are all patting ourselves on the back about Silicon Valley Bank, the consensus that everyone did a good job makes me slightly suspicious.

The Bank of England effectively made three decisions during the unravelling of Silicon Valley Bank that I want to put on the Economic Secretary's desk for her to consider. Is more certainty required from the Bank of England on the triggering of those decisions?

First, the Bank of England denied Silicon Valley Bank short-term funding. SVB UK was solvent, as it would have to be as a UK subsidiary regulated by the

Bank of England. It applied for £1.8 billion of short-term funding when it became clear that its parent company was in trouble. That funding was denied by the Bank of England, and I do not think there has ever been any significant examination of why the Bank took that decision.

Obviously, there was a run on Silicon Valley Bank, with depositors seeking to pull out their money, and the bank was unable to honour those withdrawals, which is why it applied for short-term funding. A possible alternative route could have been a temporary freeze on withdrawals and/or the provision of short-term funding, which could have allowed the bank to remain solvent in the UK. Understanding what triggered that decision, and how other banks in similar circumstances might be handled by the Bank of England in future, is key.

Secondly, as the shadow Minister said, the Bank of England initially decided to put Silicon Valley Bank UK into insolvency and rely on the £85,000 depositor guarantee and the £170,000 joint depositor guarantee. We do not know why the Bank changed its mind.

Emma Reynolds: I can tell I am going to enjoy discussing these matters with the right hon. Gentleman. I have looked into this since our exchange on Monday, and I want to clarify what happened on the Friday before the Monday in March 2023. The Bank of England issued a statement on the Friday evening saying that it intended to apply to the court to place SVB UK Ltd into a bank insolvency procedure, absent any meaningful further information. However, a buyer came forward over the weekend, which is what changed between the Friday and the Monday. It was judged to be both in the public interest and in the interest of SVB UK customers that this resolution on the Monday morning was preferable to the insolvency procedure that had been announced on the Friday.

Kit Malthouse: That is useful information about the Bank's decision making. However, the Bank still decided to go for insolvency prior to a resolution mechanism. I find it hard to see that, within that 36-hour period, it had not canvassed whether there was a market for the bank. My point remains: if I were an investor or an overseas bank trying to establish and invest significant funds in a UK branch, I would like to understand why the Bank of England makes these decisions, and the criteria and parameters by which it is likely to make a decision either way. Then, of course, the final decision was taken to sell or transfer the bank to HSBC—for a minimal consideration, I think. I really want to understand what value was placed on that bank going to HSBC, as opposed to any of the other banks that might have been bidding for it.

At the heart of this is my worry about competition. When a bank is put in this resolution position, obviously it needs to move to another bank that has significant assets and can fulfil the rightful demands of its depositors to withdraw their funds. That will naturally be a bigger bank, and there is a possibility—although hopefully this will not happen, as we will not use resolution very often—that small, higher-risk challenger banks will find themselves unable to obtain short-term funding from the Bank of England because of their size, and will therefore be gobbled up by the leviathans of the banking system. Over time, there might be a natural move back

[Kit Malthouse]

towards where we were prior to all these challenger banks appearing—to having four or five massive banks that dominate the system in an uncompetitive way.

I am asking the Minister not necessarily to change the legislation, but to consider setting out in a code of conduct what consideration the Bank of England has to give to the competitive landscape when it is resolving a bank. When it transfers one small bank to another small bank as part of a resolution, for example, that wheel might be oiled with a bit of short-term funding, in the interests of maintaining that competitive landscape. The cost of that should not fall on the taxpayer; effectively, it should be a loan for repayment. One of the benefits, if you like, of the 2007-08 crash—one of the silver linings of that cloud—is that we have a much more diverse banking landscape than before. There was recognition that having these huge organisations that crash the entire global economy if they fail was dangerous for the western economy, and that a much more diverse landscape was therefore desirable. The problem with that, obviously, is that there is more inherent risk in those smaller banks. If there is more inherent risk, we are likely to see more resolution, and in time we may end up back where we were.

I support the Bill. I think that resolution is exactly the right way to go, and we should obviate the risk to the taxpayer. There are also negatives to the system, though, so I hope that the Minister, who I am sure will do the job with aplomb, will think carefully about the impact on the world of the Bank of England's decision making and predictability; about what the Bank can do to provide transparency, whether through a code of conduct or indicators of practice; and about the impact of resolution on competition.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

3.31 pm

Mark Garnier: It gives me great pleasure to wind up this debate, with the leave of the House, on behalf of the Opposition.

First, I thank the handful of Members present, who have made very helpful contributions. The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) rightly asked questions on behalf of his constituents. He asked whether they will be under the cosh if a bank goes bust again—they should not be, under this legislation—and what banks will do to generate economic growth in his area. The Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), rightly raised a point about the legislation being extended to and used for the larger banks, which is not its intention. As ever, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) has brought an intelligent scepticism to the question of what could happen with this legislation, and has demonstrated why Parliament is such a brilliant place, with intelligent people like him scrutinising what goes on.

I also welcome the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury. He has had a glittering career, and has done extraordinarily well in his meteoric rise to Minister in not one but two Government Departments in his first Parliament. He is double-hatting already; he is a clever chap. We have come across each other in the past.

I will not take too much of the House's time, as I was on my feet just a few minutes ago, but I would like to come back to three points that I hope the Minister will address. The first is the amendment to the Bill; the Economic Secretary to the Treasury made the point that the Government do not want to support that amendment. This may come up later, and we may have more conversations about it. Secondly, does the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury feel that the Bank of England's code of practice provides enough reassurance that the bank insolvency procedure remains the default option for failing smaller banks? Finally, how does he weigh up continued use of the bank levy and regulation of our banking system against the Chancellor's growth agenda? I appreciate, however, that that is beyond the scope of the Bill.

As I said in my opening remarks, the Bill retains surprisingly strong cross-party support. It is a good thing for the Bank of England to have more tools at its disposal during periods of heightened stress, and the version of the Bill before us today—the version amended in the other place—is more robust than it started out. We look forward to getting clarity from the newly appointed shadow Minister. [HON. MEMBERS: "The Minister."] My apologies—it will be a few years before that. I congratulate the newly appointed Minister on his appointment.

3.34 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to this debate, which were small in number but high in quality. I also thank those who contributed in the other place, or by responding to the consultation that brought the Bill forward. As today's short debate has demonstrated, there is broad support, both political and industrial, for the Bill. I thank hon. Members on the Conservative Front Bench for their kind words and constructive approach, particularly, to echo the shadow Economic Secretary, previous Treasury Ministers, not least the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), who brought us to where we are today.

The enhancements to the UK's resolution regime are relatively modest, targeted and proportionate. That regime was established in the wake of the global financial crisis, and its powers were put to the test when Silicon Valley Bank UK failed in March 2023. That episode demonstrated that the regime was broadly working as intended, but it is right to learn the lessons from that experience. The first of those lessons is that the implications of a firm's failure cannot always be anticipated before the event, and sometimes it can be in the public interest to use resolution powers even on small firms that were not deemed systemic prior to their failure. That was the case with Silicon Valley Bank UK, and insolvency would have had implications for public confidence in the stability of the UK financial system.

The second lesson is that there is a potential gap in the resolution framework when it comes to managing the failure of such firms. They do not hold the additional resources to absorb losses and facilitate recapitalisation in the event of their failure. Silicon Valley Bank was well capitalised, and it was possible to find a willing buyer in HSBC. However, such an outcome may not be possible for a small bank with a shortfall in capital. At

present, such a shortfall would have to be met through the use of public funds, and there is cross-party support for reducing that risk.

We also wish to increase the options available to the Bank of England for managing the failure of a small bank. The Bill does so without imposing any new up-front costs on the banking sector, or fundamentally altering the broader resolution framework, which has been shown to work well. It rightly does not alter the public interest test that underpins the Bank of England's decision on whether to use its resolutions powers or place a firm into insolvency. I will return to that point shortly.

The shadow Economic Secretary raised a number of points. I broadly agree with his description of the events around Silicon Valley Bank UK. It was a helpful summary of developments. I can confirm that the Government welcome the amendments made in the other place, with the one exception raised by the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, which I know we will discuss further in Committee.

We have been clear that the powers are to be used for smaller banks, but that does not mean that use of the powers will become the default. Insolvency for small banks remains the default approach. The shadow Economic Secretary also raised the wider question of banking taxation. I am sure we will discuss that in the months and probably even years to come. Our view is that banking taxation remains competitive, but his comments have been noted, and we will always keep that matter under review.

The hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) focused on the proposed size limits for banks. As I have mentioned, we do not think that what she suggested is the correct way forward, but we will continue to discuss it. The intention is that the powers will be used in the case of small banks, but the lesson of the last 20 years—not just in the UK, but around the world—is that flexibility is important when it comes to resolving bank failures. She asked whether a wider growth objective should be inserted for the Bank of England. This is a narrow Bill, and we do not think it is the right place to discuss wider issues about the Bank's approach. The public interest test, which the Bank is already required to apply when it comes to resolution and questions of bank failure, provides much of the protection that she seeks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jodge) asked about the impact on ordinary workers. That is a good question, and we always need to come back to it. Another lesson of the last two decades is that a stable and strong banking sector is an important underpinning for a strong economy, and for rising wages right across the country.

I started my career in the Treasury in the years when the UK and other advanced economies were having to swiftly relearn that banks can, and do, fail, and that the consequences of them doing so in an unmanaged way are very big and very bad indeed. The lesson from that crisis was clear: a comprehensive resolution regime is important for protecting financial and economic stability and public finances in bad times, but also for underpinning confidence in the financial system at all times. This lesson is especially significant for the UK, as the financial services sector plays such a vital role in our economy—a point that was powerfully made during the debate. We have also learned that it is important for the Bank of England to have a range of tools available for managing

firm failures, because those failures can be unpredictable. The best tool for managing the situation is not always apparent prior to the point of failure, as evidenced by the failure of Silicon Valley Bank UK. That is why, despite the UK's resolution regime having worked well in practice, the Government believe that it is important to learn the lessons of the banking sector volatility of 2023.

The targeted enhancements in the Bill provide the Bank of England with a more flexible toolkit for responding to the failure of smaller banks, while also protecting public funds. The Bill also supports the Government's growth agenda. Although it is common to focus on the trade-offs between regulation and growth, confidence in and the stability of the banking sector are key to supporting long-term growth.

I am glad to have heard this afternoon that there is broad support for this Bill in the House. Assuming that support continues for at least the next few minutes, the Government look forward to engaging further with hon. Members in Committee. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

BANK RESOLUTION (RECAPITALISATION) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill [Lords]:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 13 February 2025.

- (3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading

- (4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

- (5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

- (6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

- (7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

Question agreed to.

BANK RESOLUTION (RECAPITALISATION) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of the National Loans Fund of any sums payable out of the Fund by virtue of the Act.—(*Emma Reynolds.*)

Question agreed to.

BANK RESOLUTION (RECAPITALISATION) BILL [LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the imposition of charges for the purpose of meeting expenses incurred by the scheme manager of the Financial Services Compensation Scheme in connection with the recapitalisation of a financial institution.—(*Emma Reynolds.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 26 November 2024, be approved.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

Question agreed to.

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

That the draft Greater Lincolnshire Combined County Authority Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 11 December 2024, be approved.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

Question agreed to.

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

That the draft Hull and East Yorkshire Combined Authority Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 4 December 2024, be approved.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

Question agreed to.

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

That the draft Lancashire Combined County Authority Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 26 November 2024, be approved.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

Question agreed to.

Public Services: Rural Areas

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

3.42 pm

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): Colleagues across the House will be delighted to know that, as we have rattled through the business today, we get to have a four-hour debate, so I welcome interventions, and will welcome anybody else making a speech.

It is genuinely a delight to lead my first Adjournment debate, especially one focusing on access to public services in rural areas. I am proud to be a rural Labour MP, so it is especially good to talk on this subject. I have given my debate the subtitle, “The Case for the Countryside”; Members can feel free to bear that in mind when making an intervention.

The key point in this debate is that we as a country need to value the people, the landscapes, and the produce of our countryside a great deal more. For too long, successive Governments have not recognised the crucial role of rural communities to our national flourishing. Up to 10 million people across the country live in rural areas like North Northumberland, and our natural landscapes and quiet places form a deep and enduring part of Britain’s imagination. Rural areas often possess enduring community, but they also risk becoming museums, full of interesting artefacts for visitors, but lifeless and neglected underneath. That is something, I am sure, that none of us in this Chamber wants. It is vital that rural communities are vibrant and full of life.

In this speech, I will outline the domino effect, by which a range of below-average rural public services, especially poor public transport, underperforming education, inaccessible healthcare and low connectivity, interact and overlap to drag rural areas down, including North Northumberland. I will also remind this place that rural Britain is a deep and integral part of our nation. As the frantic pace of life in our big cities has increased, so has our ability to extract, consume and bottle the virtues of rurality, while rural regions struggle at times to see the benefit in return. Every time we eat a meal, switch the lights on, turn the radiator up or take a trip to the countryside, we are benefiting from rural areas doing the hard work of producing and delivering, often out of view.

I have to ask whether our increasingly urban nation is committed to the flourishing of our rural areas in return, because the quality of our public services sometimes suggests that it is not. According to the Rural Services Network, those in predominantly rural areas pay 20% more council tax than those in predominantly urban areas, yet in urban areas, Government-funded spending power is 41% higher. I am not trying to set up some kind of dichotomy or competition between rural and urban areas; we simply have to acknowledge that sometimes our rural areas miss out when it comes to public services.

That spending gap impacts the practical delivery of services. In the northern part of my constituency, the nearest accident and emergency department is an hour and a half away. Many children heading out of the constituency for secondary school spend two hours a day travelling to and from school. The village of Pegswood, of 3,000 people, has a doctor for just half a day a week. I wonder how rural Britain can nurture our nation’s

traditions, history and community, as well as produce the goods so desperately needed by urban areas, when its basic public services can fall below the basic standard.

Any conversation about rural public services begins and ends with transport. Rural authorities spend 4.6 times less per head on bus services compared to urban authorities, yet those living in small rural settlements travel a third greater distance than their urban counterparts.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this important topic to the House. As an MP whose constituency also covers part of Northumberland, I know all too well the impact on public services in recent years. A mum in New Hartley recently shared with me how the unreliability and inconsistency of the local bus service means that her son is often late for school. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is unacceptable for children to miss out on their education as a consequence of poor public services in rural areas?

David Smith: I could not agree more. I will come on to talk about bus services, but the situation is especially challenging in counties such as Northumberland. I certainly find that there are students in my constituency who struggle to get to school.

Getting around areas such as North Northumberland without a car is extremely difficult, and North Northumberland residents are right to be sceptical of local bus services, considering that Arriva, which runs the primary bus service in my area, is owned by an American equity investment fund based in Miami. Members can make of that what they will. From 2017 to 2022, the distance travelled by bus services in Northumberland fell by over a third—the highest reduction of any authority in the north-east. The confused status of cross-border buses makes a bad situation worse, with many people around Berwick crossing the Scottish-English border multiple times a week, and having to own multiple bus passes or buy new tickets to change services. Also, the elderly cannot use their free bus pass on both sides of the border.

Recently, I was made aware of a constituent's teenage daughter who undertook an apprenticeship across the border in July. Emma—not her real name—lives in Berwick and was catching a bus to and from work; however, just a few weeks later, Borders Buses removed the morning bus. This young woman is now relying on taxis to get her to her apprenticeship in the morning. This is costing her family, who are not in a position to afford it, £150 a week. She endured a difficult time at school, but was thriving in her apprenticeship, yet that is now at risk.

What we need in rural areas is a publicly controlled bus system run for public service, not private profit, with an emphasis on accessibility, affordability and simplicity. As luck would have it, that is exactly what the Government are aiming for and what Kim McGuinness, the Labour metro Mayor for the North East, is seeking to introduce. She has capped bus fares at £2.50 for over-18s and started the process of bringing bus routes back into public control, and she wants to invest in an integrated public transport system that gets people where they need to go. No one expects rural Britain to have the same level of public transport as central London,

but a reliable network would boost confidence, improve work and school opportunities, and boost struggling communities.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): This is the second useful contribution the hon. Member has made to our affairs this afternoon. I have two points that he might want to take on board in the considerations he is offering us.

First, public funding formulas should be sensitive to the particularities of rural areas such as Lincolnshire and his constituency, and at the moment they are not. The local government funding formula and the police funding formula, for example, are skewed towards urban areas.

Secondly, and pertinent to the hon. Gentleman's point about transport, we need to re-dignify small towns and rural places by ensuring that the footprint of government in those places is felt. Over my time as a Member of Parliament, we have closed magistrates courts and removed tax offices. Driving test centres have been centralised, and cottage hospitals have reduced in number. When the dignity is taken out of rural places, it obliges people to travel much further to access what they need and it changes the character of those communities.

David Smith: Absolutely. I welcome the fact that the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon), is looking at the formula for how grants are made to local authorities in rural areas. Fundamentally, there should not be a penalty to living in the countryside or in a rural area. It is not an indulgence; it is vital to the future of our country, so we need public services in rural areas.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for his comments. We know that it costs more to deliver services in rural areas, yet rural councils are set to receive 41% less central Government funding than urban councils in the local government finance settlement that is coming up. Does the hon. Member agree that the settlement formula should consider rural deprivation alongside clustered deprivation to ensure that rural areas receive the services they deserve?

David Smith: People would expect me as a Member of Parliament for a rural area to say it is absolutely essential that we consider the peculiar circumstances, geography, logistics, the long-term challenges and the rural deprivation, which really does exist, when considering grants to local authorities in rural areas.

I will move on to education, which is another of the four areas I want to discuss. Assuming that children can get to school, having just talked about transport, we need to ensure that they can go to a good school that sets up their future and energises the local community, but when the school provision in rural areas suffers, so does the whole town or village, because there is no business or transport link more significant than the nearby secondary school.

The town of Berwick is extremely reliant on its one secondary school for the nurturing of the necessary skills and qualifications for the town's economy, so

[David Smith]

when the school struggles, the town struggles. A report from 2017—I think it still stands—noted:

“Berwick is one of Northumberland’s most deprived towns. It has a vulnerable economy characterised by poor quality job opportunities, part time working, low wages and very limited education facilities.”

Berwick does not just need a better school; it needs a school that can generate a revival in a beautiful but isolated town that has no A&E, no major employer and minimal further education. Right now, Berwick deserves, and has the opportunity to build, a new world-class educational campus on the secondary school site that combines learning with further education, vocational study, special educational needs provision, local enterprise and primary healthcare. That makes the slow progress of Conservative Northumberland county council’s plan to rebuild Berwick Academy frustrating for parents, students and the whole community.

The further education point is important. North Northumberland students keep pace with their national peers up to GCSE level, but at A-level and higher education level they begin to struggle, because further education opportunities are few and difficult to access. One constituent in Berwick told me about their son who wants to be on a sports course in Newcastle that would set him up to go to university. The council is able to provide basic transport, but only to a course in the closer town of Ashington, which would not provide him with qualifications for university. Instead, his family are paying £15 a day for his transport to the educational opportunities that he needs—an unsustainable amount for basic provision.

Imogen Walker (Hamilton and Clyde Valley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the record settlement given to Scotland by this Government should be spent by the Scottish Government on vital infrastructure such as schools and transport for constituencies such as mine, which feel sadly neglected after 18 years of SNP Government? No SNP Members are here for this debate, unfortunately.

David Smith: I do not know whether I should declare an interest as a Scotsman who is the Member of Parliament for an English constituency—and proud to be so. I have seen that with my own eyes, and I agree that the record settlement that the UK Government have given the SNP Government in Edinburgh should be used well to provide for the whole of Scotland, but especially rural areas.

I will stick with education but look a little more at special educational needs. There are 588 children on an education, health and care plan in North Northumberland. Many of those with more severe special educational needs face a 100-mile round trip to access adequate education. There are not enough specialist schools nearby, or enough specialist places at mainstream schools, to support their learning. That is why I welcome the Government’s £1 billion increase in special educational needs funding—that is excellent—and I look forward to ensuring that rural areas receive their fair share of it. Rural areas get held back by a lack of educational opportunities. They need help from a broad coalition of local residents, businesses, council and Government to develop outstanding solutions that can become engines for opportunity.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his powerful speech. I can tell him that people in the west of Northumberland share his frustration about the neglect and the contempt in which they seem to be held by the Conservative administration at county hall. I am delighted that he has picked up on the point about provision of SEN transport. Constituents visiting our surgeries are devastated by the challenges they face in getting their children into an appropriate educational environment. Does he agree that we must judge local government on the provision of those opportunities, and that residents of Northumberland will ultimately judge the Conservatives on that come the local elections?

David Smith: Yes, I wholeheartedly associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. Last Friday, I was in the village of Chatton, which is near the border between our two constituencies, to speak to a group focused on autism and special educational needs. There was palpable frustration in that room among 30 parents and carers who are simply unable to get the support they need from the county council, despite the additional funding. I believe that he and I can work on that together.

Let me move on to my third and fourth points, which relate to healthcare. Until schools improve, and until transport becomes more reliable, healthcare professionals will not move to rural areas. For Berwick to have an accident and emergency department, and for North Northumberland to have genuinely local primary care, we must incentivise doctors and nurses to move, with their families, into our neighbourhoods. Until they do, rural healthcare will continue to suffer.

Some 25% of rural residents are aged 65 or over, and in North Northumberland the average age is 54, but rural councils receive 14% less grant funding for social care services and 58% less for public health. Dental care provision is also extremely sparse. It is estimated that a 1,500 sq km region of North Northumberland has no NHS dentist. Imagine someone living alone in Wooler or Rothbury—miles from the nearest NHS dentist—whose tooth starts to twinge.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): On healthcare provision in rural areas, does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a desperate need to review GPs’ core contracts, so that we better incentivise GPs to set up in rural areas? Would he also agree that, in areas where the ongoing need for a GP surgery is clear, integrated care boards have a role in managing that estate so it can be secure over a long period?

David Smith: Yes, we need to do everything in our power to encourage healthcare professionals, including GPs, to move into rural areas, where they can have a fantastic quality of life. I think there is a role for ICBs. I am pleased to see that, in my part of the world, 25% of GP surgeries in the Northumbria healthcare NHS foundation trust are working directly as a part of the trust. We should look at any option that can draw additional healthcare resource, especially people, into rural areas.

We need to rethink how we do rural care and primary care. In Orkney, for instance, I am reliably told that doctors practise in rotating shifts—one week on, eight weeks off—and pursue other work. It is certainly an

unusual solution, but to provide rural residents with quality care, we may need to think and work creatively together. I welcome the Government's work and funding to incentivise GPs to see more patients, as well as more of the same patients, and the promise to introduce 700,000 more urgent dental appointments.

That leads me to the last of the four points I would like to make.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is being incredibly generous in giving way, and I thank him for giving me a second bite of the cherry—I know he is moving on to his exciting peroration. GPs seem less and less keen to meet people face to face and still less keen to visit them in their homes, as they once did routinely, by the way, in my lifetime. Would he agree that, rather than their distribution, the centralisation of services, which seems to have been the order of the day under successive Governments on the grounds of rationalisation, is particularly bad for rural areas and for least advantaged people?

David Smith: I do agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It may be utopian to imagine the family doctor doing home visits, but we should always aim for the ideal. As I have said, there are particular challenges in attracting and retaining GPs in rural areas.

The last point I want to make is about digital connectivity. Any discussion of rural areas must also include the ultra-rural. It can be hard to believe, but thousands of homes across this country do not receive mobile coverage, gas from the mains or even electricity. If we split the country into urban and rural, there is this other category of the ultra-rural, and many of these ultra-rural areas are in North Northumberland. I am thinking of settlements such as Elsdon and Thropton, tiny villages in the east of my constituency, which are perhaps as isolated as it is possible to be in modern England.

Perhaps 12,000 properties in North Northumberland are not connected to the gas grid, instead relying on a mix of alternative fuels, and a handful of properties do not even receive electricity. This year, residents in the upper Coquet valley are being connected to the electricity grid for the first time, thanks to the Ministry of Defence. Prior to that, two neighbours could not put the kettle simultaneously on without both houses being plunged into blackout. I remain hopeful and excited about the promised potential of Great British Energy for these ultra-rural communities. I look forward to finding out in more detail about hyper-local and hyper-rural communities can benefit from the renewables that will come about from Great British Energy.

On top of this, BT estimates that 1,000 premises in North Northumberland will not benefit from commercial investment in gigabit-capable broadband coverage, because they are simply too hard to reach. It is a similar story when it comes to mobile networks. I can hear my constituents groaning as they listen to this, because mobile signal comes and goes as we drive up and down the constituency. Ultra-rural settlements cannot take advantage of the digital age because they can barely get online. I am thankful for the Government's commitment to the shared rural network and to developing ways of supporting Project Gigabit so that ultra-rural communities benefit from these upgrades, otherwise we risk turning into two divided nations.

I could go on, and I am sure hon. Members would be delighted if I did—

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Go on!

David Smith: I thank my hon. Friend. However, I hope a few points have become clear from my remarks.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am pleased to see the hon. Gentleman in his place, both as the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief and because I understand it is his first Adjournment debate. I wish him well—he is using his time well. He has lots of time; he can go to 7 o'clock if Madam Deputy Speaker does not take exception.

One issue in my community and countryside, and the constituency I live in, is mental health—I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has had the chance to mention that. The hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), who is sitting in front of me, always speaks about farmers living alone, independence, and the pressures of life, and never more in all my life do I remember those pressures being this intense. Does the hon. Gentleman have similar problems in his constituency to those I have in mine?

David Smith: Yes, sadly my constituency absolutely has those same challenges with mental ill health in the farming community but also in the rural community, which often comes about from isolation. People living generation after generation in rural communities are proud and resourceful. Sometimes they perhaps do not reach out for help, but I would encourage them to do that—it is always a good thing for someone to reach out for help if they are struggling, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important point.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech. He and I sit at opposite ends of our region, but rural communities across the region share similar challenges. He has spoken about mental health, and I wonder if he would comment on the problem of addiction and substance abuse in our rural communities. That is a real issue in communities in my constituency, but there are some positive community-led initiatives that local councillors have been involved in, in particular Brotton, which has a peer-led scheme called Recovery Connections in the local village hall. Will my hon. Friend join me in commending that work, and does he agree that it is important to tackle the issue of substance abuse in rural communities?

David Smith: I am so pleased that my hon. Friend made that intervention. I declare an interest because, before I became a Member, I was chief executive of a homelessness charity, and I was delighted to work with Recovery Connections, which is a great organisation doing great work. We have talked about mental health challenges in rural areas, but we also have challenges with drugs and addiction, which is not the preserve of urban areas. We have our own challenges, and we need support as a result of that.

Rural areas provide so much for the flourishing of the nation as a whole, but they are not receiving enough in return, especially in terms of public services, which is

[David Smith]

the subject of this debate. Public services overlap and create a network effect to either energise or hinder the flourishing of rural areas. Bad public transport means less educational access, which dampens the desire of healthcare professionals to move in and treat our sick. That issue is not easily fixed or accounted for with a simple spending algorithm, but we need to address it.

Raising the quality of public services in our rural areas will require a combined approach across Government. The Country Land and Business Association may have a point when it says that Ministers and officials across Departments assume that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has sole responsibility for the rural economy—I am pleased to see the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs in his place—but DEFRA does not have the economic levers at its disposal to unlock the potential of the countryside by itself. DEFRA has an important role, but it cannot do that itself. That power lies in other Departments and, increasingly, local authorities. We need a cross-Government approach to rural public services, and I appreciate the Minister being here today.

Rural areas are not simply urban areas with fewer houses. They cannot be approached and handled with the same calculations as in our cities because they are serving our country in different ways, whether preserving land, investing in local communities, producing our food, reminding us of our past, generating our energy, or offering a vision of the good life. To do all that, rural residents need to know that their children can hop on the bus to a good local school that sets them up for the future, that they can access primary and urgent healthcare when they need it, that they can phone family and friends without fear of a power cut, or hop in an electric car, charged by the mains, to visit them. They need to know that their nation values them and their way of living, and is determined to see them thrive. I am encouraged by all the Government are doing and have done to serve rural areas, and I encourage them, and all Members of the House, to ensure that rural Britain plays as key a role in establishing our future as it has our past.

4.9 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for securing this debate on a really important subject. My constituents in Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages surrounding them, like people across the country, know just how hard it can be to access basic public services in rural areas. I rise to talk about an incident on Monday that has already had a significant amount of national press coverage and was mentioned yesterday by the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), in winding up a debate.

In the early morning hours of Monday morning, an enormous pile of rubbish was fly-tipped at the top of Watery Lane, a country road leading out of Litchfield that has about nine residential properties. When I heard about it, I popped up to have a look, and a genuinely staggering amount of waste was up there: it was a cuboid perhaps 20 feet wide, 15 feet high and probably at least 40 foot long. This was not a few tyres out the

back of a Transit van but an industrial scale, enormous fly-tip, which meant that the lane was completely unpassable from the north. Unfortunately for residents living on Watery Lane, the southern end of that road has been closed for a housing development for a few months, so for a time they had no access to public services. When we talk about public services, there can be nothing more basic than the ability of the fire service, ambulances and the police to get to an emergency, should one occur.

I thank Redrow homes because, as soon as it was made aware, it put a member of its staff up the top of the lane by the road closure who could keep the service road—the road that runs past—clear and make sure there were no accidents involving people crashing when trying to get down the road. Redrow also opened up the compound on its site so that the emergency services could access those properties, should they be needed. In the event, they were not, but that was more by luck than anything else. I am glad that, should they have been needed, Redrow was able to step in and do that. The company also offered to help the council clean up. When it comes to asking builders to be considerate to their communities, that is a great example of an organisation stepping up.

It is important that we raise such serious examples of industrialised rural crime. There must have been a serious set-up involving an articulated vehicle of some type because of the sheer size of what was left. Some residents have estimated that there may have been 200 tonnes of rubbish, which has today been cleared following hard work by the district council. Although there was a way for those nine households to get in and to get out to work, that morning they faced not being able to go about their business—they could not get to school or to work.

The fly-tip also led to a massive issue for the Curborough countryside centre just off Watery Lane. About 20 businesses are based there—I will declare an interest as my old man's art studio is up there now, although he is not a commercial exercise—including a butcher, a distillery, a café and a bakery as well as a host of others, including Cocker Hoop Creative, which runs Lichfield's food festival. All those businesses lost two days of trade due to this rural crime.

When we talk about the provision of public services in rural areas, that is not always just about the availability of hospitals, the availability of doctors, the distances from A to B or the availability of bus services. As important as all those are, it is also really important that we see a response, including from the police service, that is attuned to the issues of rural areas. That fly-tip was much more serious because of where it happened.

In that instance of serious fly-tipping, as in other such instances right across the country, it is really important that the police have the necessary framework to prosecute these individuals. We need an investigation into the case in Litchfield this week, because there may be some clues in that tip that could lead to a resolution. But investigations need to end not only with significant fines; we also need to start considering custodial sentences, because the actions of those individuals pose a genuine risk to life, for example if an ambulance cannot reach someone having a heart attack.

This problem affects rural areas much more significantly than urban areas, which is why it is important to raise it as part of this excellent debate. I thank again my hon.

Friend the Member for North Northumberland for securing the debate and I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting me leave to contribute.

4.15 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), a good Staffordshire man. He and I do lots of work together, so I enjoyed seeing him cast the iPad away and speak from his heart, which he did very well.

I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak—I will say just a few words, you will be reassured to know. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), who made an excellent, thoughtful, comprehensive, authoritative and engaging speech. He gave voice to his passion for his constituency and for our rural communities up and down our United Kingdom. In this House we talk about being hon. Friends, but he and I are actually friends, which is great. We have a mutual friend who I am thinking of right now, who will be enjoying the fact that I have contributed to this excellent debate.

Like my hon. Friend and many others on the Government Benches, I proud to represent a number of rural communities in God's own constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme—Audley, Madeley, Betley, Balterley and Wrinehill, to name just a few. I am proud to speak on access to good-quality, affordable and reliable transport; on tackling flooding—in Madeley that is a particular challenge—and on school finances. I am going to Ravensmead and a number of other schools to talk about some of the pressures that our schools are facing. I am proud to speak about NHS pressures, as was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield, our ambulances being able to get to incidents and our rural community generally. Newcastle-under-Lyme is indeed on the frontline.

Last Thursday evening I had the great pleasure and fortune of attending a meeting of Audley parish council. I am grateful to all its members for their hard work to champion the needs of their neighbours and our community. They also do very well at holding me to account, as well as the sometimes questionable leadership of Newcastle-under-Lyme borough council. A clear theme of that meeting was the contempt—I use that word consciously—with which the parish council is treated by the Conservative party leadership of the borough council. Planning is just one example of that.

Alongside that Conservative-led borough council, which shows the contempt to which I referred, Staffordshire county council is missing in action—unsurprisingly, it is run by the Conservative party, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield will know. As we are thinking about improving access to services in rural communities such as mine in Newcastle-under-Lyme, thank goodness we have the chance to vote the Conservatives out in May. I look forward to electing good Labour county councillors in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

I do not need to wait until May to vote, of course, because tomorrow in Newcastle-under-Lyme the good people have a chance to express their frustration with the lack of effective services in our rural communities and town centre in the Town ward by-election. The Labour candidate, Sheelagh Casey-Hulme, is brilliant. She has campaigned passionately for a very long time

about Walleys quarry, which the Minister heard me make representations about when I was in the shadow DEFRA team, and now as the Member of Parliament for Newcastle-under-Lyme. I wish Sheelagh well in the election tomorrow, as I am sure you do, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): I think probably not.

Adam Jogee: No confirmation was sought or provided.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland noted, our rural communities remain at the heart of our country, economy, society, culture, heritage and arts. They deserve to be championed by all layers of Government.

We heard from my hon. Friend just what His Majesty's new Government are doing to ensure that our rural communities get the support they need. I say gently to the Minister, who knows me well, that we will be holding him and his colleagues at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to account to ensure that we do just that. With that in mind, I wonder whether the Minister would accept my urging to ensure that the rural communities of Newcastle-under-Lyme, and Staffordshire more generally, are at the top of his agenda as he carries out his important duties in the months and years—many years, I hope—ahead.

I also echo the point of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield, which I think is bang on, and note the cross-party nature of the approach required from Government to ensure that we deliver for our rural communities. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland raised that point, too.

By the nature of their job, vocation, passion and commitment, our farmers are at the heart of our rural communities. They feed us and, in some cases, they clothe us, with sheep's wool and the rest. They play an important role in keeping our life going, and I therefore urge the Minister to ensure that we advance the buy British and eat British agenda of both this Government and many Labour Members. It is one tangible way that we can not only help our farmers, but ensure that our rural communities get the well-functioning and reliable public services that they deserve. When the Minister winds up this important debate in response to my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland, some clarity on the buy British, eat British agenda would be welcome.

As I conclude my remarks, I invite the Minister to accept an invitation I think I may have already gently put to him—perhaps in a less formal way than raising it on the Floor of the House this afternoon. I invite him to come to Newcastle-under-Lyme to see and understand the challenges facing the rural communities in my wonderful constituency, where he would be very welcome. There are a number of excellent places we can have a cold drink; I think of the many pubs in our rural communities, and there are also tea shops and places for cake.

The Betley Tea Room is an excellent example. It is on a working farm, but it has an excellent tea room. The National Farmers Union has a satellite office there, so we would be able to kill two birds with one stone: we can have cake and see the farm and understand the challenges. In fact, now that I think about it, the Secretary of State—then the shadow Secretary of State—came to

[Adam Jogee]

the farm and had some tea and cake and a tour. The only thing I would note is that when the Secretary of State came to the farm, he forgot his wellies, so I urge the Minister to make sure he has the appropriate footwear when he accepts my invitation to come and see us in Newcastle.

As I say, there are a number of pubs; I think of The Swan in Betley and The Hand and Trumpet in Wrinehill. You would be very welcome to come and visit us there any time, Madam Deputy Speaker—I will get the first round in. I will take anybody who is interested in seeing the wonders of North Staffordshire, with our local economy and all that we have to offer, exemplified by our rural areas.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland for securing this debate. As I said earlier, he gave an important speech that had us both listening and, I think, inspired—I mean that seriously—both by his commitment to his community and by the wider commitment of His Majesty's Government to delivering for rural communities. I look forward to working with him and other colleagues—there are now a number of Labour colleagues who represent rural communities, and we are working together to get things done—to deliver for the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme, to help to support the people of North Northumberland, and, most importantly, to deliver for rural communities up and down our United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before calling the next speaker, I think it is important to clarify that, although I am a huge supporter of women standing for election, I have not actually endorsed Sheelagh's candidature. [*Laughter.*]

4.23 pm

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for securing this debate. He gave a really long speech of considerable depth. I am not going to repeat that, purely because I do not want to repeat any of the things he has said in such detail.

I am grateful for the debate because it offers an important chance to reset the narrative that has gone around over recent months about our rural areas. It has been suggested that our rural areas are suddenly in crisis because of things that have happened in recent months. Let us be clear: our rural areas are in crisis because of 14 years of under-investment and the betrayal of the post-Brexit deals that undercut our farmers, making their lives much more difficult than they were previously. That needs to be put on the record.

In many ways, our rural areas are suffering because they are too robust, too resourceful, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland said, and too innovative, so they have not been seen to suffer as much as other parts of the country may have done. I have a couple of examples of that from my constituency.

House prices are an issue in my area, as they are across much of the rest of the country. In one village, Hook Norton, people working in local shops and even artists—people valued by the community—have had to leave because they could not afford to stay. Not content to allow that to continue, people in the village set up a

community land trust and invested capital in purchasing land to build properties. Last year, the trust opened 12 affordable homes in the village, catering to local communities. The scheme has its own power generation and the homes are covered in solar panels. It is a brilliant example of innovation and looking after the community in the face of challenges from elsewhere.

In the village of Middle Barton, in my constituency, bus services had been cut by the previous Conservative county council, because of decisions made by the Conservative Government in Westminster. Local people took it upon themselves to set up their own bus company, although, granted, it was manned by volunteers. Last year, not long after I was elected, I had the privilege to open the new bus scheme and see the two brand-new buses serving the community, ensuring that people there are not stranded. Those buses are electric, so they are thoroughly in keeping with our climate agenda.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about rural bus services in Oxfordshire. My seat of Reading Central has a boundary with Oxfordshire, and we have noticed in our area that the complete withdrawal of services by Oxfordshire county council was a terrible mistake. Luckily, Reading Buses, a council-run company, serves some of the neighbouring parts of Oxfordshire, near Reading, including villages like Sonning Common, but I have enormous sympathy for his residents in the northern part of the county. I offer my support to those local companies that are obviously doing a very good job.

Sean Woodcock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention.

A further example is the village of Charlbury, where there is an installation called South Hill solar farm, a community-owned solar farm providing energy to 1,200 residents. It is an incredibly popular and well-run scheme. It is in an area of outstanding natural beauty, but absolutely everybody there loves it. I mention it because this Government's ambitions are not contrary to the ambitions of those in rural areas. This Government's ambitions rely on delivering in rural areas, whether on housing justice, improving public health or, above all, delivering growth, which is our main focus.

However, people are being held back, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland said. They face a double whammy of poor connectivity in relation to transport—we have already touched on buses—and to access to broadband and decent communication services. My plea to the Minister, in my final remarks, is that he makes it clear to his Cabinet colleagues that people in rural areas do not want anything different to what is wanted by those in the urban seats, which may previously have been seen as the Labour heartland. People in rural areas want exactly the same as those in urban areas: access to good health services, education, jobs and affordable housing, and the same opportunities as everybody else.

4.28 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Quite often, I do not know how to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) and his thorough remarks. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) on securing the

debate. I have known him for only a short time, but I know how dedicated he is to his rural constituency and how passionately he feels about these issues. I listened to his four points and the interventions.

I am very fortunate. The Boundary Commission has changed my constituency many times, but it has not changed the names of the many villages that it encompasses: Astwood Bank, Inkberrow, Harvington and Norton. Most people think of Redditch as a very urban area with some significant deprivation and economic challenges, but the challenges and the deprivation in the rural parts are often forgotten. We hear the old adage, “Don’t go knocking on those doors. They are wealthy in those areas; they have no problems.” However, some of the biggest problems in my casework folder come from rural areas where there are no transport links and no access to dental treatment or healthcare. My constituency also faces some of the most significant challenges in relation to truancy and, I have said, transport links.

This debate has provided an excellent opportunity for us to focus on issues affecting rural communities, but I ask the Minister, as the Government move forward, to ensure that we take on the challenges in areas that are deemed to be affluent but actually face some of the biggest social and economic challenges in our constituencies.

4.30 pm

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Daniel Zeichner): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith). I understand that this is his first Adjournment debate, and I have to tell him that they cannot always run for as long as this—but what a brilliant debate we have had, and how splendidly he made the case for the countryside, which has been echoed in the excellent speeches from other colleagues. Let me respond briefly to some of them before turning to his main points.

I will not go into the details of the incident in Lichfield because I suspect, and hope, that a criminal case may result from it. My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) described it as not just fly-tipping but a serious example of industrialised rural crime, and it is right to put on record the grief that has been caused to local residents and businesses. My hon. Friend and his constituents have my absolute sympathy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) characteristically and elegantly name-checked many of his local businesses, beauty spots and hostels, but also mentioned parish councils, an extremely important level of local governance with which we need to work closely. I assure him that when it comes to supporting buying British, this Government are entirely in line with his wishes and the wishes of the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) raised a series of important points about community initiatives. Community land trusts are always important for promoting housing. I liked his points about rural transport very much, and I will say a bit more about that later. He also mentioned community solar initiatives, which showed just what can be done in rural areas with that kind of leadership and passion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) was right to refer to the aspirations of people in rural areas. There is a 19% productivity gap between the rural economy and the national average, but what an

opportunity there is for us and for people in rural areas to show just how important we can be. I will deal with his point about transport in a moment.

The Government are absolutely committed to improving the quality of life for everyone living and working in rural areas, so that we can make a real impact on their everyday lives and realise the potential to which I have referred. Given that part of my job title is “Minister for Rural Affairs”, it is my job to make sure that these matters are at the very heart of policymaking. As Members have said, it is a structural Government challenge to ensure that rural issues are taken up, and I am delighted that there are so many passionate voices on these Benches because it will make my job easier.

Freddie van Mierlo: National trails, which run through much of the countryside, provide vital access to the countryside both for people coming out of urban areas and for people living in rural areas, but the amount of funding for National Trails UK has not risen since 2012, and stands at just £1.7 million a year. Will the Minister commit himself to looking at that again and seeing what we can do to help out our friends at National Trails UK?

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful to the hon. Member for trying to lure me into an unfunded spending commitment. I assure him we do not do that on this side of the House, but he has made an important point, and I will of course look at it.

The Government have wasted no time in getting to work on a whole range of issues that affect both urban and rural areas. In order to pursue our growth mission, we have announced a series of planning reforms to get Britain building, removed the de facto ban on onshore wind, established a national wealth fund, announced a pensions review to unlock growth, boosted investment, delivered savings for pensioners, launched Skills England, announced a White Paper on getting Britain working, and taken the first steps to create Great British Energy. All of those measures provide opportunities for people in rural areas, and all sectors can shape and benefit from wider policy reform through the growth mission, which will create the conditions for businesses to invest and employ, and for consumers to spend with confidence. However, we absolutely recognise the specific challenges and opportunities.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): Will the Minister bear in mind the importance of community benefits from renewables? The whole of the highlands is covered in turbines, which are built overseas and often owned overseas. We have the highest level of fuel poverty in Britain, and renewables offer the only chance for rural Britain to level up financially that we will see in our lifetimes. I greatly fear that the opportunity will pass us by.

Daniel Zeichner: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, but I do not share his pessimism. There are real opportunities, but it is up to us to make sure that they are realised. He makes an important point.

The Government absolutely recognise that there are specific challenges and opportunities that make rural communities and economies distinctive, and we acknowledge the need for direct support through programmes such as the rural England prosperity fund,

[Daniel Zeichner]

which provides targeted support to rural businesses and communities. We recognise that community-owned businesses play a particularly important role in rural areas by providing opportunities for communities to come together and access services, but we also recognise that there are significant challenges facing rural community businesses and that the Government have a role to play in overcoming them.

A number of my hon. Friends have talked about rural transport, which is key to those living and working in rural communities. We know that a prosperous rural economy requires improvements in rural transport and, of course, digital infrastructure. The availability of affordable housing is key, as are affordable energy and access to a healthy and skilled workforce, so a complex mix is required to get the growth that we so want to see.

We also recognise that the need for rural residents to travel further to access work, education and training, and essential services such as healthcare raises additional challenges. We know that it can be more costly and time consuming for them, and we recognise their frustrations. I was struck by the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland about what happens when services are withdrawn. We know all too well the problems that that creates for our constituents, so this Government are determined to deliver better bus services. We have set out a plan to achieve that in our Bus Services Bill, which will give local leaders the tools they need to ensure that bus services reflect the needs of the communities they serve.

My hon. Friend was absolutely right to raise the issue of digital access, particularly for those in ultra-rural areas. Digitisation is at the heart of this Government's agenda, and we are committed to ensuring that rural communities and businesses are not left behind or disadvantaged. Through the shared rural network, which has helped to deliver 4G mobile coverage to 95% of the UK a year ahead of target, we will continue to deliver 4G connectivity to places where there is either limited coverage or none at all.

However, we are aware that rural parts of the UK still lag behind when it comes to mobile coverage, and we will continue to work with the industry to deliver new coverage to such communities via the shared rural network, enabling them to thrive. Our ambition is to go further and for all populated areas to have higher-quality stand-alone 5G access by 2030. Project Gigabit is the Government's programme to deliver gigabit-capable broadband to UK premises, many of which are situated in rural communities that are not included in suppliers' commercial plans.

Freddie van Mierlo: Some villages, including Ewelme in my constituency, successfully signed up to the previous voucher scheme but were then excluded from Project Gigabit as a result. The previous Government failed to deliver on the scheme, which meant that such villages were left with no internet at all or no fast broadband. Will the Minister commit to looking specifically at the village of Ewelme to see what he can do to include it in Project Gigabit?

Daniel Zeichner: I will certainly ask my officials to get in touch with the hon. Gentleman so that we can get him an answer on that specific question. Sadly, only

85% of UK premises can access gigabit-capable broadband at the moment. Our goal is for nationwide gigabit coverage by 2030, ensuring that at least 99% of UK premises can access a gigabit-capable connection.

Turning to rural housing, access to genuinely affordable homes is essential to sustaining vibrant rural communities, and the housing shortage drives high rents and leaves some of the most vulnerable without access to a safe and secure home. We will reform planning laws so that we can build the homes that our rural communities desperately need while ensuring that we protect our green spaces and the natural environment. As part of that, the Government recently ran a consultation to reform the national planning policy framework, and we will carefully consider how best to build more homes and introduce a wider set of growth-focused interventions that will help us build those homes in the places where people want to live and, importantly, that are supported by the right infrastructure and services.

Luke Myer: The hamlet of Aysdalegate in my constituency has no access to safe running water. This risk was identified in 2013, but now, 12 years later, it still remains. The Drinking Water Inspectorate carried out an inspection in 2023 and described the situation:

"The water from this stream is captured in a makeshift pool lined with tarpaulin and then piped to two rudimentary settlement tanks with ill-fitting handmade lids."

Does the Minister agree that this is not a situation in which anyone should be living in the 21st century? It is typical of the inertia we saw under the previous Government that nothing was done for over a decade. I note that there is not a single Conservative MP in this place to listen to this debate today. Will the Minister commit to doing something about the water and to working with me and the parish council who represent that hamlet?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. Let us speak outside this debate about that particular case; I am not qualified to comment on it at the moment.

Rising energy costs also pose a challenge to rural communities and businesses, and I am all too aware that fuel poverty rates are higher in rural communities. We also have many homes that are off grid. My party's manifesto was clear: we are determined to lower bills, boost energy security and protect our environment by setting up Great British Energy. GB Energy will also support local and combined authorities and community energy groups to roll out small and medium-scale renewable energy projects, with the goal of increasing local generation across the whole country by up to 8 GW of capacity by 2030.

Matt Rodda: In my constituency, there is an excellent small renewable scheme, and I wish to raise that with the Minister and perhaps point out the need for further similar schemes elsewhere. It is a low-head hydro scheme on the River Thames in the village of Caversham, where several hundred users benefit from cheaper electricity. However, there were significant obstacles to setting up the scheme. May I meet my hon. Friend to explain those issues? There are many other weirs along the River Thames. Most of them are not used for such schemes, yet almost all of them are potentially suitable sites for this type of wonderful renewable energy, which offers residents in rural areas a cheaper form of energy.

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend and I meet frequently, but I will very happily meet him to hear more about what sounds like an excellent initiative.

I shall turn now to another point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland, which was the importance of education and skills. It is absolutely essential that we ensure sustainable improvements in skills in rural areas, and to do that we are planning to expand our childcare and early years system, drive up standards and modernise the school curriculum. We will also boost rural and agricultural skills by reforming the apprenticeship levy into a growth and skills levy, giving businesses the freedom and flexibility to upskill their workforce. We will also be opening new specialist technical excellence colleges to give rural communities the chance to fit skills to the needs of their local economies and empower rural businesses to play a bigger role in the skills revolution. My hon. Friend also raised, again rightly, the challenges around rural health.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): People from primary schools in rural areas of my constituency have come to me, and one of the challenges they face is a falling population because of the declining number of jobs. Although they have both fixed and variable costs, they lose per pupil funding as a result, and some of those primary schools are becoming unviable. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a different funding settlement for schools in rural areas?

Daniel Zeichner: Again, my hon. Friend tempts me to rewrite the policies of the Department for Education, but I recognise the problem he highlights. I am pleased about the presumption against the closure of maintained rural schools, but he points to a very important challenge. As we all know, the survival of local schools is key to many communities, so I have sympathy with what he says.

Health was raised by a number of colleagues. We are very aware of the mental health challenges faced in rural areas, which I have discussed with colleagues

on a number of occasions. My Department has recently established a new group to look specifically at these issues, because we know it is an important challenge.

Colleagues have also talked about GPs and dentistry, which is one of the issues that consistently came up in rural communities during the run-up to last year's general election, and it is a key challenge. We know that people in rural areas who need care are often more likely to live far from those facilities, and we are mindful of that challenge. The integrated care system will have a role in designing those services, but it will need to work closely with clinicians and local communities at neighbourhood level.

We are making significant new funding available for local government in 2025-26, which we think will help with some of the wider issues. There is £1.3 billion of new funding in the local government financial settlement, with £600 million to support the most deprived areas, including in shire districts, through the new recovery grant. There is also £233 million of additional funding for homelessness services.

There is a guarantee that no local authority will see a reduction in its core spending power in 2025-26 after taking account of any increase in council tax levels. We believe this will provide the protections required for all authorities, including district councils, to sustain their services between years. Taking into account both the money allocated to councils through the settlement and the extended producer responsibility guarantee, every council will have more to spend on planning and social care services in 2025-26 than in 2024-25. For almost all authorities, we expect that to be a real-terms increase. We are also providing a flat cash funding floor after council tax increases, which means that every council will receive as much in core spending power next year as they received this year, if not more.

This Government recognise the importance of providing accessible, high-quality services across rural communities, and we will continue to do everything in our power to ensure that they are delivered effectively.

Question put and agreed to.

4.48 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 22 January 2025

[MATT WESTERN *in the Chair*]

Listed Places of Worship Scheme

9.30 am

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Listed Places of Worship Scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. There are around 20,000 listed—

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Western. Before my hon. Friend develops the debate, may I inquire about the fact that, according to the Order Paper, the fourth of the written statements to be made today, by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, is titled “Future of the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme”? If that statement is being made today, would it not be convenient for us to see a copy of it before this debate begins, so that it can inform the debate, rather than that being left until after the debate?

Matt Western (in the Chair): Sir Christopher, thank you for your point of order. I am sure that that is something the Minister will attend to in his winding-up speech.

Bradley Thomas: There are about 20,000 listed cathedrals, churches and chapels in use across the UK, belonging to a wide range of denominations, together with a number of important listed synagogues, mosques and temples. The buildings are valued for their architecture and history and for the economic and social benefit they bring to the communities they serve. These beautiful buildings, with storied histories, serve both as sacred spaces for the religious community and as spaces for the wider public.

The listed places of worship grant scheme supports faith communities by allowing them to reclaim the full amount of VAT spent on eligible repairs, alterations and additions to their building. That includes vital repair works to roofs and stonework, and improvements to facilities such as kitchens and toilets and to the thermal performance of the building.

At present the scheme, which spends only around £30 million per year, is due to close on 31 March 2025, and no extension or alternative is yet known about. If the scheme is cancelled or scaled back, it will be devastating for these historic buildings, local communities and the heritage construction sector. What a travesty it would be if, for the sake of £30 million to the Exchequer, the Government exacerbated the decay of our historical, spiritual and social heritage, with no upside.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I am very pleased my hon. Friend has secured this debate. He mentions the trifling sum the tax could bring to the Exchequer, but does he recognise the enormous, quantifiable economic value—billions of pounds—that church buildings bring to our communities? I particularly reference the work that Bishop Andrew Rumsey, the Bishop of Ramsbury

in my constituency, is leading for the Church of England on this issue. Does my hon. Friend agree that the economic value outweighs the receipts that the Treasury would get?

Bradley Thomas: I agree wholeheartedly that this is not just about the social value. There is a profound economic value that goes beyond the £30 million I referenced.

The Church of England alone has a backlog of repairs to parish churches estimated at more than £1 billion, with the annual need estimated at £150 million per year. Large-scale closures are also sweeping across Scotland and Wales. There are 969 places of worship on Historic England’s 2024 heritage at risk register, and more than 60% of MPs in England have a church, chapel, meeting house or cathedral in their constituency that is on the register.

The listed places of worship grant scheme is the only regular financial support the Government provide to help those looking after these buildings. By “financial support”, I mean simply a refund of the tax already paid to the Exchequer.

Sir Christopher Chope: Christchurch priory is on the list of churches at risk. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport could be saved any costs if my private Member’s Bill—the Exemption from Value Added Tax (Listed Places of Worship) Bill—which is due for a hearing in the House on Friday 28 March, were passed? It would exempt listed places of worship repairs from value added tax, which in itself would sort the problem out.

Bradley Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting Christchurch priory. I am certain that he will be the strongest advocate of the proposal he puts forward on that Friday.

Refunding the tax our places of worship have already paid is vital because in the UK, unlike in the rest of Europe, they depend overwhelmingly on local people to raise the funding for their buildings. In France, Belgium, Germany and Italy, by contrast, such buildings are either owned by the state or supported by special taxes.

The scheme was introduced in its current form by the Labour Government in 2001, when the right hon. Gordon Brown, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, recognised the harm that changes to VAT could cause these buildings. It was launched in the House of Lords in December 2001 by Baroness Blackstone, who stated:

“This new grant will provide much-needed public support for these historic buildings. The scheme underlines the value this Government place on our important historic environment.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 4 December 2001; Vol. 629, c. WA129.]

I plead with the current Government to recognise that.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. The listed places of worship grant scheme is vital for our communities. The previous Conservative Government extended it in 2023, and since 2022 five grants have been awarded in my constituency. I have been contacted by a number of places of worship that are deeply concerned about the future of the scheme. Does my hon. Friend agree that, for the sake of worship, outreach, youth work, helping vulnerable people, and community hubs, it is right for the Government to extend the scheme?

Bradley Thomas: I wholeheartedly agree that the scheme should be extended, given all the economic and social benefits my hon. Friend touched on and the many others that Members will cite. It is a no-brainer that the Government should pursue this.

Since 2004, the scheme has been renewed by every Government, but now a new commitment must be made, because the current commitment comes to an end in just a few weeks' time. Since 2001, the scheme has supported 13,000 places of worship, safeguarding the future of some of our most important local heritage. In addition to their architectural significance, cathedrals, churches and chapels form the nation's largest art collections, including sculpture, stained glass, wall paintings, woodwork, metalwork and vernacular art. Church buildings also form a vital part of the identity of Britain's landscapes and townscapes. They are the visual centre for tens of thousands of communities.

St John's in my constituency is a grade II listed church in the centre of the town. The top section of the spire needs replacing to ensure that the church remains structurally safe and continues to be a beacon for Bromsgrove. The parochial church council and the Friends of St John's are in receipt of nearly £250,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, plus match funding from trusts, foundations and local fundraising, to meet a total project cost in the region of £430,000. If a VAT bill in excess of £80,000 becomes unclaimable, there is a risk that the project could become untenable.

Members from across the House will have stories from their own constituencies. Residents raise money to repair their local place of worship and keep it as a community asset to pass down to the next generation. We are merely custodians of these assets. St John's is just one example, but there are more than 20 listed places of worship in my constituency that benefit from the scheme, and I want to highlight a few of them. They include Christ Church in Catshill, Holy Trinity and St Mary's church at Dodford, St Leonard's church at Frankley, St John the Baptist church at Hagley, St Kenelm's church at Romsley, St Bartholomew's church at Tardebigge, St Michael and All Angels at Stoke Prior, St Laurence church at Alvechurch, the church of St John the Baptist on St John Street, the church of All Saints on Birmingham Road, St Leonard's in Clent, St Leonard's in Beoley, the Roman Catholic church in Bromsgrove, St Catherine's church in Lickey and Blackwell, St Mary's church at Wythall, Holy Trinity in Belbroughton, St Michael and All Angels in Cofton Hackett, the church of St Wulstan and St Oswald in Clent, St Godwald's church, and St Andrew's church in Barnt Green.

We all have at least a dozen, 20 or maybe more churches or listed places of worship that are under threat because the Government have not committed to £30 million.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The grant scheme we are debating enabled St Paul's in my constituency to undergo some radical improvements to accessibility and its community spaces. Without the community spaces that operate out of churches and cathedrals, the homes for charities no longer exist. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, given that every £1 spent in churches gives a £16 return to the community, this scheme is an investment in the future of community groups and charities?

Bradley Thomas: The hon. Lady has summed it up perfectly, and I thank her for highlighting the example of St Paul's in Chichester. That is a perfect segue into the point I was just about to make: it is not just heritage and religion that are at risk if the scheme lapses. Churches and other places of worship are hubs of their local communities. Church of England churches alone support over 35,000 social action projects, including food banks, community larders, and debt, drug and alcohol advice and rehabilitation groups. In recent years, during which we have seen energy prices rise, churches have acted as warm spaces, and at times of extreme weather events they have been gathering points, providing the safety and hospitality required by communities seeking refuge from flooding and other weather events. Churches, chapels and meeting houses in the UK host and run vital support services—everything from Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to mental health support and parent and toddler groups. The saving to the NHS from delivering this kind of facility to communities is estimated as £8.4 billion a year.

The contribution that churches and cathedrals make to our creative industries and to tourism is also very significant. Some 9.3 million people visited English cathedrals in 2023—a staggering 17% increase on the year before—with many of those visitors coming from overseas. In that sense, churches, cathedrals and places of worship are a UK export.

Churches are also by far the largest base for amateur music-making by choirs and orchestras, as well as housing thousands of professional performances each year, ranging from pop to classical music. They foster talent, and musicians including singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran and leading violinist Tasmin Little began their musical careers by taking part in church music.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): My hon. Friend will obviously want to recognise the centrality to the country of Salisbury cathedral's contribution in terms of music and architectural elegance. He will also want to recognise the fact that every church takes on great responsibility for raising funds itself before it looks to the Government. The Churches Conservation Trust and the National Churches Trust do a great deal to support churches that are trying to help themselves, but the continuity of VAT support from Government is a crucial additional element that goes alongside that private endeavour.

Bradley Thomas: I thank my right hon. Friend for his contribution and for highlighting the significant cultural importance of Salisbury cathedral. He is spot on: volunteers across our communities sweat everything they possibly can out of fundraising endeavours. This is not a case of going to the Government in the first instance; this is people simply asking for support that ultimately enables churches to be net economic contributors to the communities in which they operate.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Mr Western, I probably ought to indicate that I have proudly served in the past as a member of the Ecclesiastical Committee, although I do not regard this as just an Anglican issue at all. Further to the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), the support for these buildings—for our churches—comes from generous donations by members of the public,

which are given for a very specific purpose. Does my hon. Friend agree that this money is freely given, but that it is not freely given to be taxed? I hope the Minister will be able to comment on that later.

Bradley Thomas: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There are so many generous benefactors across the country who are giving their funds—which, in most cases, they have paid income tax on—to support churches and places that provide spiritual and social wellbeing. Government should recognise that, and I certainly hope the Minister will reference that point in his remarks.

These buildings are loved by their communities, and in most cases they are also cared for by volunteers. Particularly in rural communities, the care of these magnificent buildings is in the hands of a few committed people, many of whom are later in their years. They diligently raise funds for the repair of the church building that has shaped the life of their village and community for centuries. Although I raised major projects earlier, the potential loss of the listed places of worship grant scheme in the places I have just mentioned—which may claim only a few thousand pounds per year—will determine how much maintenance and repair can take place. At worst, it could be the difference between being solvent or not, and determine the long-term survival and preservation of those buildings.

Places of worship are the very essence of place-making and community. They provide enormous value to society—value that our country would be immeasurably poorer without. The National Churches Trust’s “House of Good” report calculated that the total UK-wide economic and social value of places of worship had a market value and replacement cost of £2.4 billion per year. I hope that that puts into perspective what excellent value the listed places of worship grant scheme is for the long-term preservation of those assets. That is £2.4 billion of value for a scheme that costs just £29 million a year. Clearly, that amount of money makes no material difference to the country’s £1 trillion expenditure, so I simply cannot understand what is under threat. If the Government were not to renew the listed places of worship grant scheme, the task of keeping church buildings in good repair and open for people to use would be made much harder. More money would need to be raised by local people to pay VAT to the Government, on top of money for skilled labour, materials and other project costs.

The damage done to parish churches across England will come at a difficult time, when our communities are becoming less united than ever. The past 50 years have seen unprecedented change, with mass immigration, enhanced social mobility and evolving social attitudes. All of those factors have changed and pushed our communities in different directions and made society less cohesive. Instead of attacking one of the last few community spaces left, I ask the Government to continue funding the scheme.

I urge the Government to look now at making the scheme permanent, and not just at giving it a temporary reprieve. A permanent scheme would enable the larger places of worship, such as cathedrals that plan their repair work over five to 20 years, to commit to long-term projects with certainty that VAT costs will be covered by the scheme.

Several hon. Members rose—

Matt Western (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. Given that so many are standing, we will start with a time limit of three minutes. I ask that any interventions be kept to a minimum.

9.46 am

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this important and timely debate.

The strength of feeling on this issue is clear. An answer to my recent written question revealed that between early September and mid-December 2024, the Department received 323 items of correspondence on this topic. [*Interruption.*] Yes, I understand that. I am pleased to have the opportunity to debate this important subject.

Faith and charity sector partners are deeply concerned that the listed places of worship grants scheme may not be extended beyond its current end date of 31 March this year. The grants scheme not only helps to sustain treasured local buildings that hold the story of our nation and, through their work, contribute every day to the common good; by enabling repairs to historic religious buildings, it also directly impacts communities across the UK, benefiting people of all faiths and none, from all walks of life.

The Church in Wales operates 1,221 places of worship—cathedrals, churches and chapels—across Wales, and 73% of them are listed buildings. These treasured buildings play a central role in communities and form a remarkable treasury of significant architecture, art, history, local memory and culture.

As I outlined in my question to the Church Commissioners last week, over the past two years alone St Woolos’ cathedral in Newport has reclaimed more than £87,000 through the scheme. Further projects are in the wings and, if VAT cannot be reclaimed, it will lead to delays. The cathedral leaders are wondering whether to include in the repairs the upgrade and development of facilities that the cathedral offers for the benefit of the community. That would cost between £3 million and £4 million; adding VAT to that would make the project unachievable and it would have to end.

Given that repairs and developments are possible only through fundraising, as has been outlined, to find an additional 20% will mean that some projects will simply not take place.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): The hon. Lady talks about some projects that will not be able to continue; St Martin’s Low Marple Heritage Trust in my constituency is in exactly that position. It is a treasury of the arts and crafts movement in England. I am sure the hon. Lady would agree that the scheme should continue, or clarity on its future should be encouraged from the Minister.

Ruth Jones: The hon. Lady is right. It would be good to have clarity today. I appreciate that a statement is coming, but it would be good to have clarity from the Minister this morning.

[*Ruth Jones*]

Places of worship contribute immensely to social and economic value, health and wellbeing. The cathedral's weekly food collections enable 500 children in one school to be given breakfast for two weeks. The cathedral supports other schools, refugees, the homeless and other local food projects, and provides a place for the charity Mind to meet free of charge. Over the recent Christmas period alone, some 1,000 people passed through the cathedral doors for services—up 20% on last year. The cathedral is open every day and people regularly call in for quiet reflection and for assistance in distress.

Crucially, all that is possible only because the building is in good repair. I have given just one example of how places of worship in Newport West and Islwyn have used the moneys from the scheme wisely over the years. I strongly encourage the Government to extend the scheme, for all the economic and social benefits it provides, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Matt Western (in the Chair): I call the Father of the House.

9.51 am

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on his speech. As the Government are making a written statement today, this might be one of the shortest and most successful campaigns ever.

Churches are one of the great glories of Lincolnshire. We have 124 listed churches in my constituency alone, and I have visited them all—often when I have had a rest from canvassing in the 11 general election campaigns I have fought. The later editions of the Pevsner guides describe Lincolnshire as

“incredibly rich in medieval churches from Saxon times onwards, many of them still little known”.

In villages and towns up and down the county, there are small churches, often medieval, that are precious works of art. They are also focal points for the community. As pubs, shops and post offices shut, the churches in our villages remain, whether or not services are held regularly. Lincolnshire is not unique in this regard, as colleagues from all over the country know.

I want to quote a worshipper and member of the parochial church council at St Chad's church in Dunholme:

“We are all deeply concerned that the above scheme is due to expire in March 2025 and fearful that it may not be extended for another term.

I am sure you are well aware of the plight of fund-raising in rural areas in order to maintain and improve Grade I listed buildings plus the absolute need to, to ensure they are there for future generations.

We are constantly fund-raising to ensure that our beautiful rural church is fit for purpose to meet the needs of both the community and worshippers”.

She obviously speaks very much from the heart.

We have some glorious countryside in Lincolnshire. I spent many years as president of the Lincolnshire Ramblers, and one of the great joys of being the MP for Gainsborough is walking in the wolds. The old church at Walesby, which is known as the ramblers' church, is open to one and all to come and spend a moment of quiet contemplation. Thanks to the efforts of many volunteers, we also have the West Lindsey churches festival every year. Across two weekends this

May, 88 churches will be open to the public, completely free of charge, and church volunteers will be present to explain.

Public places of Catholic worship were not allowed until 1791, so our medieval churches today are only slightly more than a handful. None the less, there has been a growth in appreciation of the architecture of 18th, 19th and 20th-century churches. Indeed, Augustus Pugin, the architect responsible for much of what we see around us, designed many Catholic churches that are now listed. Of the 3,000 Catholic churches in England and Wales, 750 are listed, and many have had their listings upgraded to grade I.

I urge the Minister to listen to the debate, concede, and carry on with this wonderful scheme.

9.53 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to see you in the Chair, Mr Western.

Let me set the scene. There are around 80 places of worship in York, from York Minster through to a small Orthodox congregation who wrote to me this week and are seeking a new place—buildings young and old, including well-established places. The listed places of worship grant scheme is essential to their upkeep.

I want to raise two matters that have not been mentioned yet. First, the Belfrey, which is adjacent to York Minster, is currently under tarpaulin. The windows have been removed, the walls have been stripped back to the stone, the roof is about to come off and scaffolding is holding everything together. The grant is central to the £8.5 million project continuing; I hope the Minister will explain what will happen to this gutted church and its community of 600 worshippers without it. The grant is worth £1.5 million to them. After a tumultuous fundraising effort by the church, they need the scheme to continue, and urge the Minister to at least confirm that existing projects will continue until their completion.

This is about not just the church but the social infrastructure. Some £1.5 million is being invested in mental health support and children and youth services, as well as in making York a poverty-free city. The Belfrey is crucial for my community, as well as for the local economy, tourism and our fabulous heritage sector. It sits in the new cathedral precinct, which is part of the local neighbourhood plan. We must have the spec at the required standard, as 9 million visitors come to York, which is the second-most visited place in the UK, and to York Minster, which is the most visited place in the city. When it opens, it will be a place that not only explains the heritage but enables people to explore their faith. A 15% hole in the budget would stop the scheme.

Secondly, York has developed its new international centre of excellence for heritage craft. From stonemasons to glaziers, it will preserve the traditions that many people in this debate will benefit from. In fact, people around the world are looking to the centre. It is unique in the crafts that it will maintain, and it will ensure that the traditions are preserved. Much of the centre's demand will come from different projects funded by the listed places of worship grant scheme. I hope the Minister will help the centre to greater success as it embarks on this new journey by ensuring that the grant enables demand to be placed at the centre's door. So many churches and other organisations have written to me saying that the scheme must continue.

9.56 am

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Western.

For more than 23 years, the listed places of worship grant scheme has been a lifeline for communities in South Cambridgeshire, enabling congregations to afford vital repairs to their historical buildings, which are quite often the beating heart of our communities. They provide youth groups, vaccine centres, and warm places in which to gather and bring people together. The loss of the scheme would put a lot of that in jeopardy.

Places in South Cambridgeshire where there are listed places of worship include Cherry Hinton, Cotton, Stapleford, Gamlingay, Bassingbourn, Hinxton, Ickleford, Harston, Duxford, Thriplow and Great Shelford. The scheme is set to expire in March 2025, which would place all that progress and the vital roles played by these buildings in our communities in jeopardy.

Without a renewed commitment from the Government, congregations will struggle to afford the repairs needed to keep their places of worship open and functioning. The much-respected Reverend Karin Voth Harman of St Andrew's church in Cherry Hinton explained to me that it will also impact on the congregation's ability to access other grant funds. For example, they received a £250,000 grant from the heritage lottery fund, but they were able to receive and use those funds only because they had the exemption from the VAT scheme. If the scheme was taken away, they would not be able to do that, and that would affect many others.

The list of affected communities is long, as it is in many other communities. Let me mention the plans that people have in place that would be put at risk, which they have come to tell me about. The restoration plans to move away from fossil fuel reliance at St Peter & St Paul Bassingbourn parish church would be put at risk. The steep costs of the restoration of the three medieval churches in Fen Ditton, Horningsea and Teversham mean that essential repairs would be put at risk. The community spaces in All Saints' church at Harston, which were used during lockdown and which the church wants to keep expanding, would be put at risk. The small village church of St Mary and St John in Hinxton relies heavily on the exemption.

St Peter's church in Horningsea is being saved from disrepair with significant help from the VAT funds. The grade I listed parish church of St Mary the Virgin in Great Shelford relies on the VAT to afford essential repairs; without it, the church will not be able to maintain the structure and the historical Doom painting, which would be terrible. The 12th-century St George's church in Thriplow wants, with the community, to level the nave floor, but it will not be able to do that. Grade I listed St Mary's in Whaddon would also be at risk.

The scheme is critical. Please continue it and ensure that we can keep these congregations and their listed places of worship at the centre of our communities.

10 am

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this debate. My constituency of South West Norfolk is home to 138 places of worship, all unique in character and valued by the local community.

That includes Wiggshall St Germans church just outside King's Lynn, a 13th-century grade I listed church, which wrote to me just recently about the very topic being debated.

I am a proud Norfolk boy, and I am reminded of what the English poet and writer John Betjeman said:

"Norfolk would not be Norfolk without a church tower on the horizon, or round a corner up a lane. We cannot spare a single Norfolk church. When a church has been pulled down, the country seems empty or is like a necklace with a jewel missing."

I cannot come up with words quite as poetic as John Betjeman's, but I can tell Members that the churches in my constituency are treasured. In many cases, they are of an historic nature. We must make sure that we preserve them for generations to come, as previous generations have done for us.

Nearly half of all grade I listed buildings in England are churches. These buildings are largely run by volunteers who have to raise the funds needed for repairs. The ability to reclaim the VAT on these works makes an enormous difference, as we have heard from others, particularly at a time when costs for building works are substantially increasing. In South West Norfolk, like many rural constituencies, these buildings are so often more than a place of worship; they can be the very lifeblood of the local community, providing services to people who otherwise may miss out.

One church in South West Norfolk that exemplifies this is St Mary's in Feltwell. I was fortunate enough to visit the church in 2024, and I was deeply impressed by the work it does to support the local community in Feltwell. That includes the food pantry, which sees a group of local volunteers set up a small shop with essentials at greatly reduced prices to help villagers. They also provide crisis packs free of charge to those in need. That initiative is run alongside the church's regular coffee mornings and community group, which provides free access to computers and the internet—a provision that too many in rural communities sadly do not have.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is imperative that the listed places of worship scheme, or a replacement, is put in place in short order? This is not just about buildings; it is about supporting communities such as Horwich. Many worshippers from Horwich parish church have contacted me about making sure that places of worship are retained for future generations and to provide important spiritual and community support for people in my Bolton West constituency.

Matt Western (in the Chair): Order. Can interventions be brief, please?

Terry Jermy: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; it has been wonderful today to hear so many examples of community services run through churches. We all have examples in our constituencies.

When I went to Feltwell, I was so impressed by the work of Sue Garland and the other volunteers. It was a joy to see that they are preserving the building, but importantly giving it life and purpose. These provisions are crucial and highlight what our local places of worship provide in their communities. That is why it is vital that we do all we can to support their maintenance. I would welcome the Minister clarifying whether the grant scheme can be renewed for another year.

[Terry Jermy]

St Mary's is just one of 20 churches in South West Norfolk that has benefited from the listed places of worship grant scheme in the last financial year, but it remains on the heritage at risk register and is in desperate need of repair. I urge the Minister to consider what can be done to protect our most precious historic places of worship.

10.4 am

Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and Tavistock) (Con): It would be an act of cultural, social and spiritual mutilation not to continue with this scheme, which is why I do not think that the Minister will announce later that it will not be continued. My concern is that, although we are here debating this very important but limited scheme, there is on the horizon an even bigger problem with which the Government may have to grapple.

My concern, if I may say so, is not for the great cathedrals of this country that will always attract their supporters—my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) represents one of the greatest cathedrals—but for the small parish churches. They are small arks that have existed down the centuries as a repositories of the spiritual aspiration, the emotions, and the cultural and historical identities, of rural communities—ancestors have been buried there and pilgrimages paid to their gravesides. One by one, these churches are clinging on only by the efforts of half a dozen or so elderly volunteers, giving up time in the last years of their lives to preserve what has mattered so much to them. What happens when those volunteers go? We are seeing it already in Torridge and Tavistock. Churches are closing—I saw the Bishop of Exeter the other day to discuss it.

This scheme alone will not cause the survival of those extraordinary buildings so precious to our culture, our history and our nation. I implore the Minister to give thought to what should happen when these places of worship close. Are they to be converted into housing, often surrounded by open burial grounds? Not likely. We need to give thought to what will happen to these wonderful places, though not now sacred perhaps in some cases when they are closed, but still precious to the community's identity and to our national inheritance. I know that the Minister will not discontinue the scheme; I would be astonished if he committed such an act of philistine vandalism, putting at risk all these extraordinary buildings for the sake of a few million pounds.

I ask the Minister to consider, "What next?" Let us not stop just at this. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) has a private Member's Bill, the Exemption from Value Added Tax (Listed Places of Worship) Bill, on repair VAT. It is time that we considered what more can be done for these buildings and not only for the buildings—which are simply bricks and mortar, stone, with wonderful cultural artefacts within them—but for what they represent: the many hopes and aspirations of so many thousands of people, even if they do not now because

"The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full,"

but now is suffering from that

"melancholy, long, withdrawing roar".

I know the Minister knows exactly that to which I refer. I have complete confidence in him and I look forward to his statement this afternoon.

10.7 am

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this important and timely debate.

Religious buildings are a vital part of our country's heritage and architectural history, but of course they also play a central role in our communities. These spaces often serve as hubs, as we have heard, where volunteers come together to help the most vulnerable. Many of the churches and parishes across Suffolk Coastal host food banks and community larders, providing vital support to so many. These places of worship rely on the listed places of worship grant, and many parish churches receive no regular financial support and often rely on their local communities to dig deep. My main message to the Minister is that in rural constituencies, where we have small parishes and small communities, there is already a huge burden on fundraising, whereas, as we have just heard, the larger and more well-known cathedrals might attract fundraising more easily.

The 15th-century tower that is part of St Ethelbert's church in Falkenham is a really good example of a rural church that provides so much for so few. Falkenham is a small village with a population of less than 200 and the church has an average attendance on a Sunday of about 15 people, but it plays a much bigger role in our community. There is nowhere in the village other than this church for residents to meet, so it is often used for coffee mornings, concerts and social gatherings, with up to 100 people attending those events. The same is true in Sibton—a parish whose only public building is the church, St Peter's. The number of permanent homes is just 80 and the community rely on that church, which dates back to the 12th-century as a public building, but with a village population that could probably fit in this room, it is hard to fundraise the money that is needed. As hon. Members can imagine, the VAT refund is vital.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Shankill parish church in Lurgan in my constituency is iconic within the town. It has been part of the fabric of the town since 1725, and was rebuilt in 1863 following the Ulster revival in 1859. Shankill is a listed building; it is being refurbished at the moment, but the fact that the grant has been stalled means that that project is no longer able to continue—unless the grant is reinstated. That means that the preaching of the gospel is impacted, and the great spiritual and practical support that the church gives to the community is in jeopardy. The church will survive and continue, but the grant is a key part of that overall project.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I hope the clarity that we will receive shortly will provide reassurance to the hon. Member.

I would like to draw attention to two more churches in my constituency. St Edmund's church in Bromeswell is a grade I listed building that has been serving the community for about 1,000 years. Although the community has raised the funds necessary for repair and improvement works, the task becomes all the harder and steeper if VAT is not refundable. In Blythburgh, the Holy Trinity church serves a parish of just 300 people, so it is an uphill task to fundraise and keep the grade I listed church in good repair and open to all.

The grant scheme has allowed the necessary works to be carried out for so many of the churches we have talked about today and many more besides. The changes and repair work done in places like Blythburgh have made massive improvements, with improved toilets and a new kitchen, enabling the people there to extend the use of the building for wider community purposes. These are important improvements that will help churches to continue to serve rural and remote communities. The same is true for St Mary's church in Walton—a beautiful grade II listed church that has recently required works in excess of £35,000.

Those are just a few of the many fantastic churches in Suffolk Coastal that are doing so much for so many, and working hard to raise the funds that they need to ensure that they can survive and adapt to meet the needs of their community. I, along with many colleagues from across the House, urge the Government to continue the listed places of worship grant scheme beyond March.

10.12 am

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on bringing this important debate to the attention of the House. The stakes are high if the scheme is discontinued, and it will put immense pressure on a small number of volunteers to keep those precious places of worship in good order.

Churches are not just places of worship. In my constituency, Holy Trinity church in Prestwood hosts a monthly breakfast between services, as well as toddlers' activity groups and regular clubbercise sessions. St Mary's in Long Crendon hosts choral evenings, mother and baby groups, orchestral events and—very importantly—a beer festival. Without critical restoration work, and the grant scheme making it possible, churches risk losing their vital place in the wider community.

At the 800-year-old St Mary Magdalene church in Great Hampden, fundraising started in 2018 for £300,000—excluding VAT—with restorative paintworks alone costing £50,000. The VAT relief afforded through the grant scheme was so critical to the project that, in its absence, fundraising would continue to this day; work would not even have started. The rector and her team have even arranged a loan facility to cover the time it might take to claim the VAT refund because they could not raise the funds to cover that element of the cost. In the rector's words,

“The project would not have been possible without the grant scheme.”

I have also heard from St Mary's church in Princes Risborough, which alongside St Peter's church in Ilmer, has benefited hugely from the grant scheme, allowing both improvements and the maintenance of the building. In the coming months and years, substantial building works will be required that will benefit both the church and the community. Without the grant scheme, those simply will not happen.

In Great Missenden, the church of St Peter and St Paul provides a valuable service by providing a community space in the adjacent Oldham hall for activities supporting the village's Church of England school as well as for the church itself. The treasurer has made it

clear to me that the enhanced efficiency in planning for major works that the grant scheme allows for has been a great help to the church and the wider community in recent years.

I have given just a snapshot of how critical the scheme is to my constituents. When the Conservatives were in government, the scheme was renewed every year. We see and appreciate the value to communities of the vital and multifaceted roles that churches have, both in bringing people together and symbolising the proud history and traditions of our rural towns and villages. I hope that is foremost in the Minister's mind when he, hopefully, delivers good news in his winding-up speech or in his written ministerial statement later today.

Matt Western (in the Chair): Due to the constraints of time and the number of interventions, after the next speaker we will reduce the time to two minutes each.

10.15 am

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this debate.

In Taunton and Wellington, we are fortunate to have stunning examples of historic places of worship, from St Peter's church in Staple Fitzpaine to what Simon Jenkins—someone I do not always agree with—called “the noblest parish tower in England”,

St Mary Magdalene, the Minster in Taunton. These buildings are not just part of our history; they are living, breathing providers of community services. Almost half of all grade I listed buildings in England are historic churches and maintaining them, of course, comes at considerable cost. Churches and their congregations provide our country with a considerable public benefit by preserving these historic structures—a benefit that many of my constituents from such congregations worry that they will not be able to continue to provide if this scheme comes to an end.

Continuation of the scheme is simply a fair acknowledgment of that massive voluntary contribution. In fact, it is not just a fair deal for the Government, but a bargain; the value gained from this scheme goes way beyond the heritage and cultural value. It enables churches, mosques, synagogues and temples to deliver essential community and voluntary services, and we have heard examples from across the country. I know from my constituents how crucial they find St Gregory's mother and toddler group, and how important they find Staple Fitzpaine's weekly café and music events. These are also important places for the lonely to meet, enjoy a hot drink and access expert advice, which is provided at St John the Baptist, All Saints in Norton Fitzwarren, St John's in Staplegrave, St Peter and St Paul's in North Curry, St John's in Wellington, All Saints in Trull and St Augustine's in West Monkton, to name just a few.

The sheer scale and quantity of community services provided by those places of worship impossible to list—I would be here all day if I tried. They are not just buildings; they are community hubs of our towns and villages. It is right that we continue to recognise that fact and to support them. Let us protect not only our heritage, but the lifelines that these places of worship provide to the communities that they serve.

10.17 am

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this important debate. I have been contacted by so many pillars of the community in my constituency who are deeply concerned about what this might mean for their places of worship. This is about the preservation of heritage, ensuring that our future generations can enjoy places of beauty and history central to our heritage and culture.

In Great Staughton, St Andrew's church has stood for 800 years. The chair of their renovation project, Anthony Withers, wrote to me at the end of last year, deeply concerned that their aim of building a community space might be affected or even rendered unfeasible if they are unable to claim back the VAT. Anthony expressed how this project was not aimed at conventional churchgoers, but rather a space for musical, theatrical and other community events. He would dearly like to hear assurances that 800 years of history will be able to carry on, with St Andrew's remaining at the centre of their community.

I also received a moving email from a constituent who was deeply concerned about the future of the medieval All Saints church in Hamerton. The church was where she was married, where her children were christened and, she hopes, where future family marriages and christenings will happen too. However, with work needed to keep the church building safe, she is worried that the future of All Saints may now be at risk.

From Hamerton to Hertford, where the treasurer of All Saints parish church explained to me that in the last six years alone they have been able to claim back £50,000 for various projects, including repairs to the church tower, refurbishment of the bells, a new gas boiler, restoration and rebuild of the church organ, installation of a new lighting system and the limewash on the internal walls—all work that must be done to keep that church going. The site has had a church standing on it for nearly 1,000 years.

Our churches and places of worship are resorting to ever more inventive and ingenious ways to raise funds for the upkeep of their ageing buildings. All Saints Parish church in St Ives runs a popular event twice a year called "Booze in the Pews". I attended the last two events and spoke with the vicar, Mark Amey. The funds raised go towards the upkeep of the church and, for anybody passing through my constituency in a fortnight's time, the next event will be from 6 to 8 February—but I digress.

I know that all Members see on a daily basis the importance of these places and the people who selflessly devote their lives to serving those whom we represent. In summing up, on behalf of all the constituents represented by the Members present, I ask the Minister to outline what steps the Government will be taking in order to extend the listed places of worship grant scheme.

10.19 am

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Member for (Bradley Thomas) for bringing us this debate. All Saints parish church in South Antrim is one of the finest Elizabethan Gothic ecclesiastic buildings open for worship in the whole island of Ireland. Originally built in 1596, it is currently embarking on a repair

project for its bell tower, which will cost just over a quarter of a million pounds. The church has applied for significant funding, but the £45,000 that it hopes to claim from the scheme is crucial to budgeting for that work.

That church is of specific interest because unfortunately, following this year's Christmas morning service, there was a fire in the church causing significant internal smoke damage. The church is now looking to repair the smoke damage while continuing with the original repair work, so its small congregation is now required to undertake two significant fundraising efforts. It is willing to do that, but the continuation of the listed places of worship grant scheme is crucial to its budgeting.

In regards to other churches in my constituency and across Northern Ireland, representatives of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland who I spoke to talked about the essential services in other churches and church buildings that now may come under pressure, as all Members have raised. I have one word for the Minister, Proverbs 11:14, and I know he will listen to it:

"Without wise leadership, a nation falls; there is safety in having many advisers."

The Minister has many advisers in this place who are advising him to keep this scheme open. I would encourage him to listen to those words.

10.21 am

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this debate. I am time constrained, but I want to mention St Mary's in Stanwell, a grade I listed 12th-century Norman church. An overseas visitor remarked to me recently how odd it was that the Normans chose to build such a beautiful church right by Heathrow airport—I think they slightly missed the point. We also have St Peter's in Staines, St Nicholas's in Shepperton and All Saints in Laleham, all of which have benefited from the listed places of worship scheme.

When churches fall into disrepair, our generation lets our communities down, and when churches crumble, the fabric of society itself crumbles. The Minister is clearly not motivated by self-interest, so I point out that my own church, St Mary's in Sunbury, a beautiful grade II listed church built in 1752 down by the River Thames, is due to be visited by Mr Speaker on 4 March, where he will conduct a conversation with the congregation. Should the Minister wish to make himself a hero and ensure that the Speaker gets a warm welcome from the people of St Mary's in Sunbury, I am sure he will see sense, listen to the mood of this Chamber—indeed, the mood of the country—and extend this scheme.

10.23 am

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on bringing us this important debate. Ely and East Cambridgeshire has many beautiful listed places of worship. They form part of the fabric of our villages and towns, and of course Ely cathedral watches over Ely and the fens and villages for miles around. Their congregations work really hard to maintain these buildings, not just for their own place of worship, but for the benefit of all of us, whether regular congregants, people who go just for special occasions or, as we have heard, people who use them as hubs and for events—or just because they are absolutely stunning buildings, part of the fabric of our heritage.

I used to help to assess a related grant scheme, so I have seen how hard these congregations work to raise money. Obviously, they do cake sales, book sales and all sorts of things, but one of the most inventive ones was guessing where the cow was going to lay her first pat in the field. Asking those people to raise an extra 20% is a significant ask and, as we have heard, it will stop many of these schemes going ahead.

I ask the Minister to extend the listed places of worship grant scheme and to consider, preferably, making it permanent—or, if not, extending it for a significant period of time. That is because these are capital projects that take a lot of planning, and it takes years to raise the money required. People need to know that this scheme will be there into the future to help them to make vital repairs.

10.25 am

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Our churches are listed places of worship; they are treasured assets that really must be preserved.

During my degree, I loved studying the role of our church; I even read Bede's "Ecclesiastical History", which dates back to 731 AD. As the Father of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), has noted, our medieval parish churches contain the vast majority of surviving medieval artwork in this country, so they really must be preserved.

For example, St Peter's church in Brackley, which is in my constituency, is grade I listed. It is believed that the site the church is built on has been a place of worship since the 7th century AD. The oldest parts of the church itself are Norman, from around 1100 AD, and they play an important role in the charitable organisation—for example, hosting the Mother's Union, which meets monthly on a Thursday afternoon in the church hall.

Talking about charity and voluntary activity, I am very proud of the support that the Tove Benefice in Towcester, which can be accessed via the grade I listed St Lawrence's church, has provided to Ukraine. That charitable work has been led by Steve, the husband of the Reverend Paula Challen. They have collected in the church literally tonnes of aid and transported it to Ukraine on numerous journeys. I have so much respect for their support and continued dedication.

Finally, another example of a treasured asset, which is rather closer to home, is St Peter & St Paul church in Easton Mauduit. It is home to the exquisite memorial to Sir Christopher Yelverton, who died in 1612. Sir Christopher was returned as the MP for Brackley in 1563, was then the MP for Northampton and, on 24 October 1597, he was elected as Speaker of the House of Commons. The church is also home to captivating architecture, glorious furnishings, other magnificent memorials and stained glass. We would be at a loss if we did not offer all the support needed to allow such buildings, and all the succour that they provide, to continue.

10.27 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure, Mr Western, to serve under your chairship, and I thank the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this debate for his contribution.

We wish to see the heritage and faith that we have in this country continue. The preservation and support of places of worship is not just a matter of heritage or architecture, although such places are a crucial part of the national heritage; they also provide hundreds of millions of pounds to the economy. However, the £30 million allocated for them annually is only a fraction of what is needed.

Strangford, my constituency, is a place steeped in history and tradition, where faith has been central to the community for centuries. It would be a tragedy both spiritually and culturally if places such as St Margaret's church in Westminster, which is just across the road from Westminster Hall, or the many churches across this land no longer fulfilled their intended purpose, which is to be living places of faith and community.

It is crucial that the Government recognise that these buildings are not simply structures, but are central to the mission of the church, serving as a base for critical community outreach. They are sanctuaries—places where people come together for worship, prayer and fellowship. They are places where the community comes together to support one another—to be the hands and feet of God in this world.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund has been encouraged to support some churches with community projects and parks. St Mark's church in Newtownards, the parish church in my local community, received money from the fund and is now a community hub, hosting groups representing every age from birth to the twilight years. Indeed, many churches are the driving forces behind volunteer-based care for the elderly, the disabled and marginalised groups.

The Government must acknowledge the vital role that the Church plays in the fabric of our society, not only in maintaining cultural heritage, but in providing essential social services. To that end, the Government should act decisively. By expanding the listed places of worship scheme and encouraging the National Lottery Fund to allocate more resources, ensuring that funding is available for all necessary repairs, whether they are urgent or preventive, the Government can ensure that churches, cathedrals and abbeys continue to be the heart of British life, preserving our heritage while serving our community, and preaching the gospel and the word of God as it is in the Bible.

10.29 am

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western, and I thank the Minister—a trained Anglican priest who, I am sure, has our best interests at heart—for tolerating the lamentations of we lay people.

I start by thanking the dozen or so constituents who have written to me about the listed places of worship grant scheme, especially Mark Goodwill-Hodgson, John Edwards, Derek Hollis, Conrad Oatey and Tony Cox, who all shared deeply personal testimonies with me about the importance of their local places of worship in my constituency of Rushcliffe.

What is unique about the listed places of worship grant scheme is its accessibility, paying out approximately 500 grants a month at an average of £4,000 each. We should all be proud of the wider impact that this has had over the last 20 years, and I know that my constituency of Rushcliffe alone has many churches that have benefited

[James Naish]

from the scheme during that time. You have asked me to be brief, Mr Western, so I simply commend this scheme to all Members. I look forward to the outcome of the forthcoming spending review, as well as the statement later today, which I hope will provide greater clarity and certainty for listed places of worship about their futures under this Government.

10.30 am

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing the debate. I come from a different angle as I was very much unaware of it, so I thank the Very Reverend Karen Rooms of Leicester cathedral for bringing it to my attention. Leicester cathedral is the cathedral where, when we found King Richard III in a carpark, we reinterred him, and many in our city believe that is what led to Leicester City winning the premiership the season after, so it is absolutely vital to us.

Cathedrals are more than places of beauty, religion and art. I, as a Muslim, volunteer for a Sikh charity serving food in a Christian church for the whole community. Reflecting what has been said, churches and cathedrals are places of community cohesion. I also come from a culture in which we do not own places of worship; we are simply their custodians. We are custodians of our churches and cathedrals.

Sir Roger Gale: The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point. It has been raised earlier in this debate, and it worried me. Our parish churches are, of course, important, but is it not true that our cathedrals are also monumentally expensive to maintain? Is not the grant every bit as valuable to, for example, Canterbury cathedral in the see of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Shockat Adam: I agree wholeheartedly. They are our heritage and we must save them for our future generations. The scheme should not just be extended; it should be made permanent and accessible to many places of worship.

Matt Western (in the Chair): I call on the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, and I would appreciate it if her speech could be reduced to around nine minutes.

10.32 am

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on calling this debate and I also congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings), Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) and Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane) on the points they have made.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): In my beautiful constituency of Tiverton and Minehead, I have 25 grade I listed churches. There is hardly a village that does not have a grade I listed church and churches with other statuses. I hope the hon. Member agrees that, without this grant, there are dark days ahead for these communities.

Tessa Munt: I thank my hon. Friend, and I add Tiverton and Minehead to my list.

First, let me quote one of the people who wrote to me. They said:

“It’s such a great scheme because the volunteers who raise money for church repairs find it such hard work making multiple lengthy applications for grants with usually little to show in return. This VAT relief once you have raised the funds is the one thing that is certain and takes the edge of all the effort”.

I recognise that in 2024 this scheme already gave 5,000 listed places of worship the benefit of returning up to £42 million from the Government to congregations across the country. That £42 million is a fixed annual pot, and there are, I understand, over 7,000 applications.

I will briefly indulge in talking about my own constituency, which I know the Minister has visited on occasion. I have had numerous communications with people, mainly from churches, but also, significantly, from Wells cathedral, where I saw Jethro Tull play a few years ago. The variety of activities is enormous. My partner and I should probably declare an interest; my partner played table tennis in Christ church at Theale last week. Holy Trinity church in Blackford has carols with vast slugs of wine provided to the whole congregation, St Cuthbert’s at Wells has a crib festival and St John the Baptist in Axbridge hosts the annual community awards presentation. There are others such as the Holy Trinity church in Burrington and St Mary Magdalene church in Wookey Hole. All of those places have Remembrance Sunday services where we recall the duty that people have paid to this country. My local church, St Mary’s in Wedmore, runs “The Clash of the Choirs”, which is now world famous, I have to say, and sounds sedate, but is actually a joyous celebration of all sorts of singing, school choirs, folk, handbells and a unique clap-o-meter. There are also the city of Wells almshouses, which are home to some of our more vulnerable elderly citizens. The chapel of St Saviour is benefiting at this moment from works that are being carried out under this scheme.

One of the things I would like the Minister to consider is the conditions that are required for people to claim under this scheme, in which the VAT refund is dependent on having work commissioned, carried out and paid for against a VAT invoice of £1,000 or more—as I understand it—and only then can the church submit a claim. One of my concerns is that if this scheme is to be reduced, or stopped and wound up, then I ask the Minister for great understanding and for transition arrangements for those churches and chapels that already have works in train. It is quite difficult for people to get that work done, particularly when a number of my communities have been suffering from flooding and various other things, meaning that the number of available contractors has also been reduced.

I will not carry on in too much detail, but I was very pleased to receive a letter from the Secretary of State that recognised that,

“Listed places of worship hold great cultural and historical significance, representing some of the nation’s finest heritage.”

I am grateful that the Minister and Secretary of State recognise that, and I would ask for some tolerance and kindness in continuing this scheme, which is so important to our various communities.

10.37 am

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I start by praising my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this vital debate. As we can see, it is incredibly important to many hon. Members, and I want to acknowledge contributions from a number of them, but given the time, I cannot acknowledge everybody. I thought my hon. Friends the Members for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool), for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) and for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), the hon. Members for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell), and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and Tavistock (Sir Geoffrey Cox) all made wonderful contributions, as did the other Members I have not been able to mention. They have all made their faith communities incredibly proud. I take your steer, Mr Western, and will try and give the Minister as much time as possible to satisfy the Members in this House, because this is an important debate.

Britain is defined by its history: up and down the country, people are fiercely proud of their heritage. As His Majesty's loyal Opposition, it is therefore right that we hold the Government to account as we try and stand up for our history and protect our heritage. In Opposition, we have campaigned on this issue very vehemently and I know there is a written ministerial statement on the way. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough said this might be the shortest campaign ever.

Chris Bryant: The shortest WMS.

Saqib Bhatti: It might be the shortest WMS, which I hope tells us how the Minister is extending the scheme. I want to thank all the people from across the country who have written to us on this issue—their voice matters. I thank all the volunteers who protect our most beautiful heritage sites.

The Conservatives are very clear that Britain's rich history, deep sense of tradition and incredible national story is something we should always protect, and there is no doubt that our churches, and other places of worship that have been announced, are fundamental to that. These cherished buildings play key roles in their local communities, serving both as a window into our past and as active centres of support and sanctuary for people of all faiths and none.

The people who look after them, as custodians of our future generations, are volunteers who give their time and energy generously with very little external help, but many of them are reliant on the vital lifeline that is the listed places of worship grant scheme. Introduced in 2001, the scheme provides essential grants covering the VAT charge and repairs to listed buildings used as places of worship. I am proud that the Conservative Government had a very strong record of supporting that important scheme. Under the previous Government, the listed places of worship grant scheme was extended, providing funding to cover VAT on essential repairs, which meant thousands of churches were protected for generations to come.

However—this may change—Labour is yet to announce whether it will fund the scheme past its expiry in March this year. The Budget came and went without an answer.

This uncertainty is making the task of those who look after these precious buildings more precarious and stressful. Many are understandably delaying their plans until the Government make up their mind, meaning more leaky roofs, more draughty windows and more cold churches during the vital Christmas period. With the WMS on the way, I am hopeful that the Minister will announce something meaningful that goes beyond one year. I share the ambition of my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove for the permanency of this grant, so I hope the Minister will address that point.

According to Historic England, 969 places of worship are under threat, including churches in the Prime Minister's constituency. When questioned about the scheme at the Dispatch Box last week, the Minister quoted a hymn, but the custodians of our historic churches need more than a hymn and a prayer. They deserve clarity and support from the Government, which I hope the Minister can give us today. That is important because Historic England's informative heritage at risk register paints a harrowing picture for England's historic sites. For places of worship in particular, the possibility of roofs collapsing or a lack of maintenance on stonework would be catastrophic.

Numerous constituents in my constituency of Meriden and Solihull East have written to me about their concerns for some of our most beloved local churches. They told me that discontinuing the scheme would

“be a disaster for listed places of worship”,

and that the ability to reclaim VAT

“makes an enormous difference, particularly at a time when the cost of building work has increased substantially.”

There is great frustration about the Government's failure to confirm the extension of this vital scheme. It is not just felt by constituents; it has an impact on all our communities and on the rest of society.

The chair of the National Churches Trust, Sir Philip Rutnam, has called on the Government to renew the listed places of worship fund. Sir Philip states that the crisis affecting church heritage could get worse in the coming months if this vital “financial lifeline” is scrapped. The Bishop of Dudley, Bishop Martin Gorrick, also paints a bleak picture, saying,

“It is not just heritage that is at risk if the Scheme lapses. Churches and other places of worship are home to so much social enterprise and action: Church of England churches support over 35,000 social action projects such as foodbanks, community ladders and debt, drug, alcohol advice and rehabilitation groups.”

The director of the Friends of Friendless Churches, Rachel Morley, wrote to the Secretary of State saying,

“The impact of this cut at a parish level would be devastating” and that,

“We place the burden of caring for thousands of the nation's most important buildings—undoubtedly the nation's greatest free heritage resources—on a tiny proportion of the public who are, for the most part, volunteers.”

That view was eloquently shared by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and Tavistock (Sir Geoffrey Cox).

I hope the Government will confirm the continuation of the scheme as soon as possible or, better still, an expanded scheme that helps the custodians of listed places of worship to carry out vital repair works in the first place. One challenge I would put to the Minister is that the funding has been a rebate for many years. Let us make it into a grant and let us make it permanent.

[Saqib Bhatti]

Will he also consider the private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), which raises quite a vital point? I hope he addresses that.

I cannot speak about this issue without addressing the broader economic picture. If the Government were to neglect these cherished buildings, it would be an act of vandalism, but it would come as no surprise to many of our constituents if the Labour Government did turn a blind eye to this threat to our heritage, given where we are economically. We have seen the calamitous impact of the Chancellor's callous Budget on our great houses already, including on our historic houses, and I have already written and made comments about the impact. Independent analysis has shown that the dramatic increase in inheritance tax could spell an end for many of our historic heritage sites and estates across the country. This would cost jobs and mean that some of the UK's most popular stately homes would be closed.

I have very little confidence in the long-term faith that the Government would put in our heritage. Of course, the dire economic circumstances make a big difference. I have already raised the matter on the Floor of the House, because it is becoming ever clearer that the Chancellor will have to cut budgets. Although many of our voters, including many of my constituents, do not believe that they can afford a Labour Government, what they certainly cannot afford is the Minister abandoning our most vital sector, so I encourage him to stand up to the Chancellor and try to protect those vital budgets. As the cost of debt goes up and the economic situation becomes more dire, the Chancellor will have even less headroom to spend on schemes such as the listed places of worship grant.

Mr Western, in deference to your timing request, I will conclude. I share the concerns of many beyond this House that the Government are yet to protect our heritage. As we have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, hundreds of churches have been left with a deep sense of uncertainty for months. The Government's failure to commit to that funding risks imperilling centuries of British history and heritage, all while leaving gaping holes in our local communities and depriving our constituents of spaces to accommodate celebration, grief, art, music, sculpture, political hustings—of course—wellbeing groups, childcare, addiction support sessions and so much more. The listed places of worship grant scheme is essential, and I urge the Minister to make the strongest possible case for its renewal to the Treasury; otherwise, many of our constituents will ask, "Is nothing sacred any more?"

10.45 am

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I feel as if I have been beaten up for the last hour and a quarter in the most genteel way, with a maniple rather than a boxing glove. *[Interruption.]* I see that most people do not know what a maniple is; perhaps I am the only former priest in the room.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), excoriates me for citing a hymn. It was:

"nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God,"

and the Department will announce its decisions. The hon. Gentleman says that the Church cannot rely on a hymn and a prayer. Actually, if I might gently correct his theology, that is literally what the Church does rely on. He needs to go back to the 39 articles; I am quite happy to provide tutorials.

We have had Bede—not in Latin, I note. We have had Jethro Tull; I think that that was Jethro Tull the band, rather than the 18th-century agronomist. We have had Matthew Arnold, to whom I will return a little later, and of course Betjeman. We have also had Proverbs; I think 11:14 was quoted, very sensibly, but if we go up to 11:13, in the King James version, which is always my preferred one—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I thought that that might carry at least half the House. It reads:

"A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter",

or in a more modern translation,

"A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy person keeps a secret."

That is what we have been doing in the Department for a while now.

I warmly commend the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas), who put his case extremely well. I think that I agreed with nearly everything he said, as I will come to in a moment. The right hon. and learned Member for Torridge and Tavistock (Sir Geoffrey Cox)—one of my favourite Conservative Members—quoted Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach", and he knew that I would know it:

"The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full...

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar".

The right hon. and learned Gentleman is quite right. Part of the problem is dwindling congregations, which are sometimes fewer than a dozen. I know that the Bible says

"where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I",

but when we are down to two or three, it is difficult to raise the funds for a beautiful, ancient building that is very expensive to maintain or even keep warm. Those are significant challenges, on which I want to work with all hon. Members.

We have focused mostly on Anglican churches—there are obviously not many medieval Catholic churches around—but of course this issue relates to all listed places of worship in the country and to many different congregations, denominations and religions. There is a specific issue for many of our very historic churches, which are beautiful and need our help as a nation.

The hon. Member for Bromsgrove is right that churches are community hubs as much as anything else. They host youth groups, such as the one I used to run at All Saints, High Wycombe; I think I was a bit of a trendy vicar back then—that is all gone now. He referred to food banks, which are also run in many churches. In fact, the old Conservative Association in one of my valleys closed and became a food bank, which is run by a new church that has been set up there. That has managed to save an old historic building, which is great.

Choirs and orchestras often perform in churches, and churches are often warm spaces for people in winter. Although my memory of most churches is that they are rarely warm, the fund has been able to help to make

segments of churches into warm places. Churches are also refuges for lots of people. The bit that we have not mentioned very much is that they are a place of worship, which is an important part of the spiritual life of this nation. Births, deaths, baptisms, funerals and weddings are a very important part of community life and a commitment to God.

Churches are also of phenomenal artistic and architectural importance. Some of the most beautiful buildings in this country are historic churches. The right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) mentioned Salisbury cathedral. There is the famous painting, of course; it is a very beautiful cathedral. I cannot now think of it without remembering the horrific, horrible Russians who claimed that they had come to Salisbury to visit the tourist site there when we know that they came with murderous intent.

Many of those places are a vital part of our country's tourism. They are also often a living archive. Whether it is the memorials on the wall or on the floor, the brass rubbings that people look at, or the churchyards themselves, genealogy is still a very big business around the world, including for thousands of Americans. I think Walt Disney at one point came to Northamptonshire or somewhere where there is a d'Isney who may or may not be related. Many Americans come to British churches to see where their forebears came from.

Sir Roger Gale: Will the Minister accept that the volume of tourists that he has just referred to is essential to many listed buildings, particularly places such as Canterbury cathedral? That volume of tourism also, of course, adds to the cost of maintenance.

Chris Bryant: Yes, it does. For many cathedrals, deciding whether to charge is a difficult balancing act. It is a complicated decision, but the passage of millions of people through a building does wear it down. Toilets have to be renewed, places have to be kept warm, and the electrics have to be repaired and kept safe; we have heard a couple of references to fires in churches over the years.

I fully accept that volume of tourists is a massive challenge for us. We have a different settlement in this country compared with other countries. In the Church of England, when I was in the diocese of Oxford, we had what we used to refer to as “dead men's money”, which is the Church's historic endowment, but it is often stretched very thin.

Hon. Members have talked about funding. The churches themselves do a lot of fundraising, and I put on record my tribute to the widow's mite and to those who have contributed significant sums over the years to keep churches open. I think Andrew Lloyd Webber has played a significant role in that, as have many others who have given tens of thousands of pounds or have left money to their local church. When I was a curate in High Wycombe we had to raise thousands of pounds for the spire. I think I sat for 24 hours outside the church reading poems, including Matthew Arnold's “Dover Beach”, to help to raise money, and then they threw me out of an aeroplane as well—with a parachute.

The single biggest chunk of money that goes to churches, as the hon. Member for Bromsgrove knows, comes from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Between 2017 and 2023, the amount of money given to smaller

churches came to £165,188,049. That far eclipses the amount of money that comes through the scheme that we are talking about today. Even Bromsgrove has received £1.2 million from that fund since 1994, including for St Laurence, Alvechurch, which got £189,000 for repairs to its tower last year.

In addition, there is the Churches Conservation Trust, which is governed by the Redundant Churches and Other Religious Buildings Act 1969. We will be laying a statutory instrument fairly soon to enable that to continue with something in the region of £3 million, and it is responsible for a specific number of churches. The Church of England has also set aside £11 million for its Buildings for Mission fund. All that funding is excellent.

I have to say that, as a Minister of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the financial situation in our Department is very tough. Many hon. Members who have spoken could equally have come along and asked about the museums or libraries in their constituency, which have struggled because of local authority funding cuts over the last 14 years; or they might have said to me, “What about the local theatre or the local arts venue, which are struggling for finances? Or the music venues that have been closing, two a week, for the last few years?”; or they might point to other forms of heritage at risk. I note that the shadow Minister made several spending commitments for the next general election campaign, including significant extra funding for a whole series of different heritage bodies. There are a significant number of churches on the heritage at risk register. It is good that 23 places of worship have been removed from that since 2023, but obviously we want to go further if we can.

I tried to come to the House as soon as I could after we came to a decision. Going through the process in the Department has been difficult because the funding is so tight and we have a lot of competing demands. In addition, we have a series of arm's length bodies, such as the national galleries and museums that are Government-owned and under Government responsibility, which we cannot leave out of the equation. I note the Father of the House's comments earlier—I am sure he is not accusing me of using some kind of hidden tactic—but I wanted to come as soon as I could to respond to the debate, which we knew was going to be today. I have officials and everybody lined up so that I can make the proper announcements to the House as fast as we possibly can, because I think Parliament should hear them first.

Members will be aware from the Order Paper that an announcement on the future of the listed places of worship grant scheme is due today. The written ministerial statement will not say much more than I am about to say now, so hon. Members should not get too excited. I am pleased to be able to give certainty and announce that the scheme will continue in 2025-26 with a budget of £23 million. We have made this difficult decision against a tough financial background and bearing in mind a wide range of compelling priorities for expenditure within the Department.

In order to meet the budget, we have introduced a cap on the total amount that a listed place of worship can claim per year. We have set that at £25,000, which can still be spread across multiple claims from the same church. In all the years so far, 94% of applications have been under the £25,000 cap, and the vast majority of

[Chris Bryant]

claims—over 70%—have been for less than £5,000. A written ministerial statement will be made shortly in both Houses to confirm and provide further details of this announcement, but, to be honest, there is not much more detail there.

Gideon Amos: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I will, but I need to give enough time for the hon. Member for Bromsgrove.

Gideon Amos: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. He said £25 million. Is it correct that there was £42 million of funding in the past? Is this a cut of £20-odd million?

Chris Bryant: No, that is not correct. The maximum amount that was spent last year was £29 million—I will be straight with the hon. Member that it is a smaller amount of money this year. An allocation had been made for £42 million but that amount was never spent because there were not sufficient applications.

By tradition, a cathedral is not symmetrical because only God is perfect. I am sure this funding is not perfection in terms of what everybody would want, but I hope it is at least acceptable.

10.59 am

Bradley Thomas: Because I am conscious of time, I will not thank hon. Members individually, but I thank everyone collectively. I am really pleased to see the extent of cross-party support here. We have approached the matter in a non-political spirit, recognising the heritage and identity of churches and listed places of worship and the spiritual contributions they make across the entire country.

I welcome the Minister providing a continuation of the scheme for 2025-26, although the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) was spot on when he said that the scheme was a bargain as it was. It would be a false economy to reduce the scheme and not to give it a degree of permanence. I implore the Minister to go back to his Department and consider how the scheme can be extended permanently—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No.10(6)).

Child Arrangements: Presumption of Parental Involvement

11 am

Matt Western (in the Chair): I will call Dr Marie Tidball to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the presumption of parental involvement in child arrangements.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. There must be urgent reform of the presumption of parental involvement in child arrangements, known in law as presumption of contact, on the basis of evidence and principle, and to ensure that children's voices are at the heart of our family courts.

The de facto common law principle of presumption of contact was legislated for in the Children and Families Act 2014, which inserted sections 1(2A) and (2B) into the Children Act 1989. That legal principle means that parents should always be given contact with their children, even in circumstances where there is a known domestic abuser.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for raising this massive issue—well done for bringing it forward. In the world we live in, it is always the most innocent—the children—who suffer the greatest in a family breakdown. Does she agree that we must do more to ensure that, where there are doubts about safety, we should utilise supervised parental visits? Getting this right is an essential part of the battle against violence against women and children.

Dr Tidball: I certainly agree. To illustrate why, I want hon. Members to imagine a school night with a child being repeatedly asked by his father if he had completed his homework. The child replied in an exasperated tone, "Yes." His dad stepped towards him with his fists ready to punch him. The boy's mum stepped into the space between the fist and her son, and pushed him out of its way. The full force of that fist hit her so hard that she was spun round and fell down the stairs, bruising her arms, legs and back. From the top of the stairs, the child's father shouted to his son, "Look what you made me do." Imagine the same boy being driven to tears after his father made his brother eat peas until he was sick. The boy's mother left her husband, taking the children with her.

Imagine a scene, six months later, where the father barricaded a Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service officer in her office for 15 minutes. Social services were aware that that same father had made statements that he was capable of killing. Then imagine that, despite knowing all that, a family court permitted the father of those two boys five hours' unsupervised contact per week. Claire Throssell, my constituent, does not need to imagine that nightmare. She and her two sons, Jack and Paul Sykes, lived it.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): Women's Aid highlights that the pro-contact culture in family courts can force children into contact

with abusive parents, sometimes against their will. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is crucial that family justice agencies recognise children as victims in their own right, as outlined in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, to prioritise their welfare and, most importantly, save lives?

Dr Tidball: I do indeed, and I will return to that point later, not least because Jack and Paul Sykes told their social workers that they were scared of their dad. The youngest told them that he was “pure nasty”. Their secondary school was so concerned about the domestic abuse at home that it also alerted social services. Yet, on a two-hour contact visit permitted by a family court and allowed to go ahead by that same CAFCASS officer, Jack and Paul were locked in the attic by their father. Using gasoline, their dad then set multiple fires alight across their home. Paul, aged nine, died at the scene after his elder brother tried to save him. Jack, aged just 12, died later in hospital. The father also killed himself in the blaze.

Jack and Paul Sykes were supposed to return to their mother Claire that night. Instead, the boys died at the hands of a known domestic abuser. Their voices were not heard by social services, nor by the court. CAFCASS never heard their voices either. In fact, the day that Jack was supposed to speak to CAFCASS for a welfare assessment was the same day Claire cradled him in her arms as he died. The only time Jack’s voice was heard was when he was held in the fireman’s arms as he used the last of his strength to say, “My dad did this and he did it on purpose.”

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The hon. Member is making an immensely powerful argument; that is a tragic tale. Does she agree that, as well as domestic abuse being taken into account, perpetrators of child sexual abuse should be taken into account in relation to parental involvement? I support the campaign of my constituent, Bethan Parkinson. Amending Jade’s law to that effect, to include domestic abuse and child sexual abuse, would be a useful step forward.

Dr Tidball: I do agree. I will discuss further proposals later in my speech. Jack and Paul would never have been in the reach of a known domestic abuser, were it not for the presumption of contact. Although schools have a statutory responsibility to report suspected incidents of domestic abuse, in contrast the presumption does not put the children of known domestic abusers first.

Ten years on, this place must hear Jack’s and Paul’s voices reverberate loud and clear, because tragically their voices are not alone. Women’s Aid found evidence of 48 child deaths at the hands of a known domestic abuser that took place following a permitted contact visit between 1994 and 2015. The Domestic Abuse Act, as my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) mentioned, recognises that children are victims of domestic abuse in their own right. Child contact is a known risk indicator for domestic homicide, yet we still do not know the true scale of the problem.

The vast majority of court reports are not published, with only 10% of rulings coming to light. Only last month, the sentencing of Sara Sharif’s known domestically

abusive father and stepmother for her murder showed all of us that action is urgently needed to change the law. Her life must not be forgotten.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): As the MP for Sara Sharif, I am very thankful that the hon. Lady has raised her case. As she knows, I called for an immediate safeguarding review, to understand the reasoning. However, it appears that the perverse incentive for parental contact, with Sara’s father being given custody, contributed to her death. Does the hon. Lady agree that family courts and that perverse incentive need to be changed?

Dr Tidball: I absolutely do agree and will return to my proposals for reform later.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an immensely powerful speech. It was extremely moving yesterday for the Education Committee to hear directly from my hon. Friend’s constituent, Claire Throssell. Claire’s work, in the context of her unbearably painful experience, is deeply inspiring, and I pay tribute to her.

We heard from her how problems in the family courts, including but not limited to the presumption of contact, have knock-on consequences for the wider work of child protection. Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on the Minister to ensure that there is strong, joined-up and effective working between her Department and the Department for Education so that we make sure that everyone who has a role in the protection of children is doing the most effective work possible?

Dr Tidball: I agree. We have said that we will take a mission-centred approach in Government, particularly to halve violence against women and girls, and I will return to that point. As a reference for *Hansard*, I mention that Claire Throssell MBE is with us in this Chamber today.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making the most powerful of speeches. We need joining up with the police service. My constituent fears every day that her children are in contact with their father. It is really important that we look at the thresholds, particularly with the Crown Prosecution Service, for prosecuting cases.

Dr Tidball: I agree. As someone who has worked in criminology and criminal justice for over a decade, I think the need for us to move beyond siloed working can be no more important than it is in these sorts of cases.

Just yesterday, we learned that the man Kiena Dawes named as her killer when she committed suicide wants to launch a custody battle over their daughter, saying that

“I’m coming to get you baby girl”.

This man has been jailed for six and a half years for assault of and controlling behaviour towards Kiena. Our current law would allow this person to have unsupervised contact with their child.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing such an important debate and for making such a powerful speech. Does

[Emily Darlington]

she agree that the visitation presumption, custody presumption and all these sorts of things that happen in family law courts are a continuing perpetration of the domestic abuse that the women and mothers were fleeing in the first place? I will keep this case anonymous, but in my constituency I was meant to meet a woman on Saturday. The handing over of the children on Friday had been so abusive and painful for her that she had to cancel her appointment with me because she was in hospital with heart palpitations. Can my hon. Friend address how we can ensure in the future that the presumption in the court service takes into account that this is continuing domestic abuse for both the mother and the children?

Dr Tidball: Absolutely. I will return to this later, but the harm report makes quite clear the re-traumatisation of both children and parental victims of domestic abuse that comes with repeated attempts at contact and the presumption that is currently in place. The consequence of that is a generation of lost voices like Jack and Paul Sykes and Sara Sharif, but there is no definitive way of knowing how many parents whose partner or spouse is a known domestic abuser have been persuaded into some form of shared care because of the presumption.

The harm report, published in 2020 by the Ministry of Justice's expert panel on harm, found that presumption of contact must be reviewed urgently, because the principle "put a misplaced emphasis on the child's right to a relationship with both parents...above the child's welfare and right to be safe from abuse and its effects".

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I pay tribute to the incredible campaigning work of Claire Throssell MBE in the face of unimaginable grief. My hon. Friend mentioned the Ministry of Justice report, which highlighted that the culture of the family courts and professionals involved in cases showed a systematic disbelief of abuse and the acceptance of counter-allegations—for example, parental alienation—without robust scrutiny. Does she agree that the report, which was left to gather dust, must be dusted down and put into immediate effect?

Dr Tidball: I absolutely do. Furthermore, in response to my hon. Friend's important point, the report specifically stated:

"To the extent that the courts' pro-contact culture operates as a barrier to addressing domestic abuse, it serves to reinforce that culture."

Indeed, section 6 of the report laid bare that children's voices are being "muted or unheard" in domestic abuse cases because of the pro-contact culture.

Jess Asato: One of my constituents, a domestic abuse survivor, has had all contact with her children removed, as well as her domestic abuse claim rejected without evidence. She has now had to pay not just for contact visits but monthly drug tests, when her drug use was not proven at all, making it completely unaffordable for her to see her children. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is past time that we stopped our family courts from being used as a tool of abuse against survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence?

Dr Tidball: I do agree. Our court system should be one where justice is achieved for vulnerable victims of abuse, rather than an additional and secondary means of victimising them.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way—she has been very generous in doing so in this short but important debate. A constituent of mine, who will remain anonymous, has undergone domestic abuse that the family courts process not only allowed to continue as economic abuse, but facilitated. With family courts still failing to ensure the safety of child victims, and given that around 60% of cases in the family courts involve domestic abuse, does the hon. Member agree that much more needs to be done to protect families from being re-victimised and traumatised via the very process that should be delivering them justice?

Dr Tidball: I agree, and nowhere is that clearer than in the cases of my constituent's sons, Jack and Paul. Not only was their father known to be abusive, but the boys did not want to see him—all while he was demanding 50:50 contact in the family courts. Claire promised her sons that she would not rest until the law was changed to prevent more children from dying like they did. When I was elected last year, I promised to help her.

Labour's important mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade will require a national effort, and require us to use every tool available to target perpetrators and address the root causes of abuse and violence. Last week's Second Reading of the landmark Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill marked a transformative change to child protection in education, and now we need to hold family courts to the same standard by repealing section 1(2A) of the Children Act 1989.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesend) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this incredibly important debate, and I second many of the comments she has made in her incredible speech. Does she agree that the cases of children with special educational needs who cannot express their feelings and fears must be taken into account, and that the presumption of contact must be stopped in those cases where there is live domestic abuse?

Dr Tidball: I do agree, and those factors have a cumulative, additive effect on those young people, silencing their voices even more so than those of other victims. That is one of the reasons why the harm report was clear that

"the presumption should not remain in its present form"

and recommended that it be reviewed

"urgently in order to address its detrimental effects."

Today we are focusing on presumption of contact, but there is much more that could be done to make the family court system child-centric. We can be bolder by changing the language in the Children Act 1989 to say explicitly that a presumption of contact should not be given to a known domestically abusive parent. Further, protections could be strengthened by incorporating practice direction 12J in primary legislation. We also need to ensure that no interim contact takes place before assessments are fully completed by CAFCASS. Additionally, we must legally recognise children as victims of financial

abuse under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. Shockingly, there is currently no definition of rape or consent in the family court system.

Natalie Fleet (Bolsover) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very important issue. Everybody in this room wants children to be born with two loving parents, but that is not possible for everybody, and it is definitely not a luxury that every child enjoys. Currently, when a woman is raped in this country, and she gives birth as a result, the rapist can apply for access to the child throughout their life. A woman in my constituency, and women beyond, talked to me about the trauma inflicted on them not only at the point of the attack but as they raise their child. The law now acknowledges that children born from rape are victims of crime, but it is vital that perpetrators are not given access to those children, continuing their unwanted presence in the victim's life. The harm that that access can cause must be recognised to protect the young people and their mothers from violent offenders. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a change to the law?

Dr Tidball: I do agree, and I thank my hon. Friend for her powerful statement. That is why we must urgently spell this issue out in primary legislation, alongside having a more tightly drawn definition of domestic abuse towards children in section 3 of the 2021 Act.

Over four years have passed since the UK Government launched a review of the presumption, as recommended by the harm report. The Conservative Government made no response, but now there is an opportunity for our new Government to take action, look at what other countries are doing and embed child-centred approaches in the family courts. Australia has repealed a similar piece of legislation, and the US is rolling out a law to incentivise states to ensure that their child custody laws properly protect children.

We must show leadership and be a beacon of light for children's rights around the world by changing the law so that family courts prioritise children's welfare and safety over the privilege of parental contact rights. Our Government must do what the previous Conservative Government failed to do, by taking a child-centred approach and changing the law on presumption of contact.

No more towns such as mine should be left to grieve. No more parents should have to make the ultimate sacrifice of the life sentence of losing a child at the hands of an abusive spouse or partner. No more parents should ever have to send their child on a court-ordered visit and hold them tightly in their arms hours later as they die. This Government must now act to save lives for generations to come by ending contact at any cost.

Let us not just imagine a world where the voices of children are put at the heart of our family court system, where children such as Jack and Paul are listened to, not ignored, where children have a childhood free of fear and oppression, and where children such as Jack and Paul live the lives they deserved to live. Minister, I urge you to do all you can to make that world a reality.

11.22 am

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball) for securing this debate on an incredibly important subject. I am deeply sorry about what her constituent, Claire Throssell,

has been through. The loss and trauma that Claire and her family have experienced is unimaginable and, frankly, unspeakable. If I can address you directly, Claire, the resilience you have shown in the face of the devastating loss of Jack and Paul is astounding. Your commitment to campaigning and advocating for children and adults who have experienced domestic abuse is inspirational, and you are shaping the national conversation on this issue. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend and to you, Claire, for the time you spent with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), back in November to discuss the presumption and the wider issues surrounding it.

There is no question but that protecting vulnerable children from violence and abuse must always be a first priority for the state, and the family courts have a vital role to play in that mission by protecting children and safeguarding victims of violence against women and girls. What does the statutory presumption we have been discussing do? As currently designed, it has two important aims. The first is to ensure that any parent who poses a risk to their child can be prevented in law from being involved in their child's life. The second is to ensure that when it is safe, and only when it is safe, to do so, children are able to maintain some form of relationship with their parent after separation.

Under our current law, the child's welfare is, as it must be, the paramount consideration. This is known as the welfare principle, and it is enshrined in section 1 of the Children Act. The presumption reflects an understanding that, where it is safe, and only where it is safe, to allow it, and where it would be in the best interests of a child's welfare, both parents being involved in a child's life is a goal of family justice.

The Children Act sets out this two-stage process, and it is important that we understand what that process is and how it works when family courts come to consider it. First, the court will consider whether a parent can be involved in a child's life in a way that does not put that child at risk of suffering harm. If it cannot be assured of that, the presumption does not apply. If a parent can be involved in a way that does not put the child at risk of suffering harm, the child will move to the second stage, and the court will consider whether the parent's involvement would further that child's welfare. If there is evidence that a parent's involvement would not further the child's welfare, the presumption can be rebutted and will not apply to that parent.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge set out the history of how that came to be enshrined in our law. In 2014 the Children Act was amended to introduce the presumption of parental involvement, built on well-established case law in our domestic law and in law enshrined in the European convention on human rights. The intention was to recognise the benefits of both parents being involved in a child's life.

Emily Darlington: I appreciate that the Act was amended in 2014, but our understanding of abuse has widened since then to encompass financial, emotional and coercive control—abuse is not limited to just physical violence. In the light of that, is it not time to review the law and change the definition of harm to the child to encompass the wider definition of what we now understand abuse to be?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the broader understanding of what can constitute abuse has to be incorporated in how we reflect on and review the presumption. The point made by a number of Members—that family courts must never be locations where victims can be re-traumatised by the legal process itself—is a vital one. It is also important that, at the centre of our family courts and law, the best interests and safety of the child are always the focus of any decision making. If we were to ask any family court judge, they would reiterate that that is the law they apply.

It is right, however, that a review has taken place. The Government understand the concerns that have been so eloquently raised today. As my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge pointed out, the previous Government and the Ministry of Justice conducted a wide-ranging review of private family law proceedings. A harm panel comprising experts analysed submissions of evidence from victims and families from right across the public, publishing a landmark report on private family law. As I said, family courts must never be a tool for domestic abusers to continue to exert their coercive control and abuse over others.

The panel recommended that we review the presumption of parental involvement, because in some cases it is leading to negative and unintended consequences. That review has been undertaken, and the Government will be publishing the findings. At the moment, we are grappling with what the policy implications of those findings will be. It would not be right for me to pre-empt the publication of the findings, but it is on its way. As soon as we can publish it alongside our policy response, we will.

Dr Sullivan: May I ask the Minister for some advice, then? If some of our constituents have found that the family courts process and procedures have led to the re-traumatising of victims, what advice can we offer them? As the Minister eloquently set out, the family courts are not designed to do that, but it does occur.

Sarah Sackman: If that is what is being experienced, it needs to be fed back. His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service has complaints processes and, in my hon. Friend, her constituents have an outstanding advocate to make those points. I will be taking back the lessons that we learn in today's debate, and it is right that the feedback happens. I will come in a moment to what we are doing, not least through the pathfinder pilot, to reshape and reform our family justice system so that the re-traumatisation does not occur. The progress that we are seeing through the pathfinder pilot, which this Government will extend, is a vital part of that work.

One hears talk about reviews, but it is not enough to simply have a review, and it is important that we act on it. We are not waiting to act. As others have said, this Government have a landmark ambition to halve violence against women and girls within the next 10 years. There is a role for our family courts to play in achieving that wider culture change. Others have made the point that we need joined-up, mission-based Government—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Education, Health and Care Plans

[Dr RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for education, health and care plans.

I thank everybody for coming along to this really important Westminster Hall debate on a subject that fills our inboxes. The Government Benches are very full, and some of the Opposition Benches are reasonably full. I will try to keep my speech as short as possible, because so many people want to speak, but there are various points that I want to make.

The debate is about Government support for education, health and care plans. For the benefit of anybody watching the debate who does not understand the system, EHCPs are a fundamental part of the special educational needs system. They are responsible for providing the additional support that children need in school to help them through their educational life and beyond. The big problem is that children and parents do not get the support they need through the EHCP system. Even when EHCPs are granted, schools are sometimes unable to deliver the support set out in them, so parents end up in a ridiculous situation and in many cases have to take their local authority to court. Local authorities lose 99% of cases, but that delays and delays the process and costs parents and local authorities a huge amount of money.

On 3 September 2024, the Government published local authority-level figures on waiting times for a decision following an education, health and care needs assessment. That assessment is the first stage: the parent applies for an EHCNA, and the local authority has six weeks in which to decide whether it will accept it, and 20 weeks in total in which to issue the EHCP. So how long are people actually waiting? Well, there are huge discrepancies across the system. Hampshire county council issues EHCPs within 20 weeks 75% of the time, which does not sound too bad, right? Essex county council, where I am situated, issues EHCPs within 20 weeks 0.9% of the time. Both councils have more than 3,000 requests.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Ind): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing forward this important debate to the Chamber, as she is right to mention the timescales. As she knows, in 2023 only half of EHCPs were issued within the statutory 20 weeks, and whether children receive support depends too much on their postcode and how well their parents can navigate what can only be described as a chaotic system. Does she agree that the special educational needs and disabilities system is failing families? We cannot have a sticking-plaster solution; we need a root-and-branch review.

Marie Goldman: I wholeheartedly agree that the system is completely broken and needs complete reform. I gently say to the Minister and anybody listening to the debate that the longer that reform takes, the more harmful it will be for children. Children are suffering right now because they are not getting the support they need. Children keep getting older; they do not wait for Governments to decide what they are going to do or for root-and-branch reforms. Children and their parents

need the support right now. Although I would absolutely welcome a wholesale review and change, there are things we can do now to alleviate the problems. If the Minister takes away only one thing from the debate, I hope it is the plea for more to be done now and for the reform and implementation to be sped up. I will come in a bit to the things we can do.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this vital and important debate. She talks about inequality, and SEND funding is unequal across the country. Somerset council is part of the f40 group, which includes a number of the most poorly funded councils across the country. It received less than £8,000 in gross dedicated grant funding per mainstream pupil in 2024-25, which is more than £5,000 less than the best-funded local authorities. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must tackle this postcode lottery and urgently provide better support for some of our nation's most vulnerable pupils?

Marie Goldman: Of course, and my hon. Friend raises an important point. We must tackle that inequality. The Government will say, "We put £1 billion of extra funding into special educational needs." That is great—it is much better than no extra money for special educational needs—but it will not touch the sides. Local authorities are saying that they have a deficit in the high needs block of £3 billion, and some estimates say that that will go up to £8 billion in the near future. We are looking at a massive funding shortfall.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing today's important debate. In Slough, attainment outcomes for children with special educational needs and disabilities were below the national average, and that is precisely why we need more funding and resources for Slough children. As a parent, I can only imagine the anguish of parents who have to navigate the complex and time-consuming process of gaining an EHCP, particularly given that only half of EHCPs are issued within the statutory 20-week limit and 98% of appeals are successful. Does the hon. Lady agree that, to improve EHCPs, we need first to regain the trust and confidence of parents?

Marie Goldman: Absolutely. Parents' trust in the system is important, so we need to show that we are listening to them. We also need to show that we are giving them the information they need to alleviate their stress. Someone who has a child with special educational needs knows that their child needs extra support. This is already a stressful time in their life; they then have to sit and wait for an EHCP to land in their inbox, perhaps in week 19—it is supposed to be 20 weeks, so of course it should land in week 19—but then it does not turn up, and keeps on not turning up. That is incredibly stressful, and it takes away parents' trust in the system. We should be more transparent about that.

We talk about an EHCP being issued within 20 weeks, but across England 37.4% of decisions took six months or longer—that is just ridiculous—and 5.7% took a year or longer. That is completely unacceptable, and it leaves parents in a very difficult place. We need to be more honest with parents and to make that information much more available to them. My new clause 3 to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill would help to

make the system much more transparent for parents by making local authorities publish how well they are performing against those statutory deadlines. That would be much better for parents.

What is the impact on children? We must remember that we are not talking about random numbers or about figures on a spreadsheet somewhere; these are real children who have real lives, real parents and real families. They have aspirations in life, and we need to support them. What does all this mean for them? One SEND professional wrote to me about one child's case:

"This child, who is autistic, non-verbal, and has sensory processing challenges, applied for an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) in October 2023. It is now January 2025, and they are still waiting for their EHCP to be issued. In the meantime, they are placed in a mainstream school with no tailored support. The result has been incredibly stressful for the child, their family, and the staff working with them. The school has now reached a point where they cannot cope, and the child is being home-schooled, isolated from peers and without access to the specialized education they need and deserve."

One SEND co-ordinator, who is also a teacher, wrote to me:

"It is very frustrating with the length of time it is taking for EHCPs to be finalised. Although they are back-dating the funding (which is great), by the time the EHCP actually is agreed, it is often too late for parents to request school placements ready for a transition at the start of the school year, which is often what we need it for."

There is a preference for mainstream, and I hear the Government say that we should educate as many children as possible in mainstream. I do not fundamentally disagree, but mainstream is not suitable for all children, and certainly not when mainstream schools do not have the resources they need to provide education and support.

Mainstream sounds good in principle. However, Contact—a charity for families with disabled children—wrote to me, saying, "Local Authorities like Essex"—again, that is where I am—

"are reducing the provision in section F for a child with an EHCP as they believe that a lot of the provision in section F comes under ordinarily available provision, which they say the school can provide as standard. All the special educational provision that a child with an EHCP needs is legally required to be stated in section F of an EHCP. It is through section F that there is a legal duty for Local Authorities to make this provision. Parents have been told by schools that there is no funding for SEN provision or ordinarily available support. How can children be reliant on SEN support when there is no funding for it?"

Schools are really struggling to deal with the situation. The idea of mainstream and of "ordinarily available" provision is great, but not if schools are not provided with the funding they need. I know that the Government can say, "Well, we have increased the funding for schools," and they have also increased teacher pay, which is great—teachers absolutely should be paid more—but they have also told schools that teacher pay needs to be funded out of their budgets, which makes the situation very difficult.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I must congratulate my hon. Friend on her preparation for this debate, which has attracted so many people to Westminster Hall today—except, of course, from the party that created a lot of the problems we now face. On her point about mainstreaming and special school education, does she agree not only that many rural areas are underfunded but that people in those areas face the additional challenge of expensive home-to-school transport to access specialist

[Andrew George]

provision, because there is insufficient budget for that transport? That issue needs to be addressed if we are to have an even playing field across the country.

Marie Goldman: I thank my hon. Friend for that really important point. I do not live in a rural area, so it is easy for me to overlook issues such as this. However, I do know that many councils have raised it; indeed, to be fair to Essex county council, it has raised it with me. When we talk about root-and-branch reform of the system, we need to make sure that we address the whole system and everything that goes with it, including transport. My hon. Friend raises an important point, and I thank him very much for that.

What is the impact on the school budget? One primary school is funding 90 hours of learning support assistant time a week because there is no EHCP, and it is having to find that funding out of its own budget. That is not through lack of trying to get EHCPs. The school said that it had applied for an EHCP for one child in January 2024, but that child has not even seen an educational psychologist yet.

Schools tell me that they do not have the buildings and the other resources to be able to safely look after these children using ordinarily available provision.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important and timely debate. Even when plans are eventually put in place, children and young people struggle to get suitable school places. They face hours of travel each day, especially in rural areas, or they are left at home without appropriate education. Does my hon. Friend agree that funding needs to ensure that provision is local, meets needs and is well resourced?

Marie Goldman: Yes, and it is very hard to disagree with that point. Of course provision needs to recognise what the local challenges are, and those differ in different localities. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point.

Let me return to LSAs and the support they provide in schools. Often, there are several children with EHCPs in a class, so it is sometimes necessary to have more than one LSA to support them. However, it is hard to recruit LSAs, because, as schools have told me, the salaries do not match the skills that LSAs require. Also, LSAs are not suitable in all cases, because young people with severe special educational needs can—through no fault of their own; I want to make that very clear—be very disruptive and, unfortunately, endanger other children if they are not properly supervised. That is why it is really important that we have LSAs, teaching assistants and all the support staff necessary to support these children. One special educational needs co-ordinator told me:

“As much as the LSA children don’t need 1:1 support full-time, there are some children that really do require 1, or sometimes 2, adults with them throughout the day if everyone is to be kept safe and for the child to have their self-care needs met in a mainstream environment.”

We talk a lot about schools, but this issue also affects further education—for example, sixth-form colleges. They tell me that the annual reviews that are done as part of the EHCP process focus too much on educational attainment and on academic achievement and progress,

when colleges in fact need to understand what special measures they need to put in place to best meet the needs of the children who are coming in. That is not necessarily about academic achievement; it is about how colleges can best manage the behaviour that pupils exhibit and keep them safe. Colleges say that, unfortunately, EHCPs do not place enough emphasis on behaviour, and their plea—I hope the Minister is listening—is that if we look at the EHCP process, we should encourage it to focus on that issue and not just on educational attainment. Colleges also say that some information in the annual review of behaviour is historical, and might put sixth-form colleges off accepting pupils, even though it would be perfectly appropriate to accept them because their behaviour had changed and they could be supported in different ways.

I also want to emphasise the importance of early intervention, because addressing issues early is key. Some children will not need support throughout their entire life or even their entire school life, but getting in early, especially with speech and language issues, can help children to progress just as well as children who did not need additional support. It is not necessarily always about long-term support; sometimes it is about early intervention, and then we can save money later.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): It was good to hear yesterday from the all-party parliamentary group on special educational needs and disabilities about the importance of early intervention. We heard from the Lancashire and South Cumbria integrated care board, which showcased its really interesting work. On the back of that, I reached out to my ICB in Suffolk and North East Essex and I understand that the health response there on early interventions is quite good. Bearing in mind that the hon. Lady and I both represent Essex constituencies, it would be worth her looking at the ICB connected to her area. Perhaps we could work together on improving outcomes for parents and kids in Colchester and Chelmsford.

Marie Goldman: Of course, I would be delighted to work with the hon. Lady on that sort of issue. I was also at that APPG on SEND meeting, although I could not stay for the whole thing. I am glad she raised it, because at that APPG meeting, an example was given to us of a child who had situational mutism. The intervention they received early on meant that they were able to progress and achieve their full potential, which I thought was fabulous. Unfortunately, I have an example of exactly the opposite in my constituency, where a child with selective mutism did not receive that support and is now not in school at all. The importance of that support cannot be overstated.

We could talk a lot about why there has been an increase in EHCP applications, about covid and its impact, about the lack of socialisation and what that has led to and about the lack of early intervention. Maybe some parents are asking for EHCPs because it is the only way to get the support that might ordinarily have been available if schools were not feeling the pressure so much. Ultimately, this is a systemic failure, and I want to move on to some solutions.

We need to do this quickly—remember, every single day that children grow up without that support is another day they are suffering. Other than root and branch

reform, we need better communication between schools and colleges, between local authorities and parents, and between schools and parents. The list could go on, but I remind everybody that communication is two-way. It is not just the local authority sending out a briefing pack—that is not good enough. We need them to listen, and we need the Government to listen.

We need more training. We need qualified and experienced people working with children. A qualified and experienced SEND professional told me:

“People like me, who are trained to work with SEND children and adults, often find there is no structured role for us within councils or government systems to support schools, families, or nurseries effectively.”

We need to do more about that. There are people who are willing to work and have amazing experience in the system, so let us help them get the qualifications to be able to help parents and young people. One SENCO said that SENCOS need more career path options. Could we have an option, for example, to fast-track some training? Could there be some kind of associated psych qualification? I do not know, but maybe that could be looked at. We need to make it easier for parents to understand what is going on.

Returning to the issue of tribunals, when local authorities are losing 99% of cases, something is seriously wrong. I wonder whether some of those delays, where the local authorities are deciding to take parents all the way through to tribunal, are—to be very cynical—a way to avoid having to pay the costs of providing the support to the children during that time.

I welcome the Education Committee’s inquiry on solving the SEND crisis and advertise to everybody that the deadline to contribute is 30 January. I say to the Minister that, at the risk of repeating myself, we really do need some action now. I urge the Government to work on what steps they can take now to make children’s lives better because, at the end of the day, this is about supporting children’s futures. I look forward to hearing from colleagues across the House and thank them for taking part in this incredibly important debate.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): We are going to work out the time limit for everyone, because 34 names were submitted to speak, but I think there may be even more Members in this room now. The Clerk has done the calculation and it is 75 seconds each—one minute 15 seconds. We will start, as a model of brevity, with the Chair of the Education Committee.

2.51 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Thank you, Dr Huq. With such limited time, I simply reiterate that we have a SEND system in crisis. It is letting down children and their families. It is a contested and embattled system and is no way to decide and deliver on what is in the best interest of children. As Chair of the Committee, I welcome some of the measures that the Government are bringing forward, but I also believe that there is further to go. That is why, as the Committee, we have prioritised SEND as our first substantial new inquiry of this Parliament. I have good news for Members with constituents who are interested in and concerned about this subject: today we have extended the deadline for the submission of written evidence to 6 February.

We are serious about looking at the evidence of what is happening across the country, but also at where there is good practice, both in this country and overseas. We will do our best to assist the Government to set out a programme of reform that delivers for children and their families. I urge all Members who have an interest in this topic to encourage their constituents to submit evidence to our inquiry.

2.52 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) on calling this vital debate.

EHCP provision is a national crisis, but how it plays out locally varies enormously. In East Sussex, 87% of EHCPs are issued within the 20-week target, but hop across the border to my area of West Sussex and it is just 3.6%—I thought that was the worst statistic out there, until I heard what is going on in Essex.

This crisis is destroying people’s lives. Take the example of Sarah—not her real name—from my Horsham constituency. Sarah’s son was offered a place at Crawley college, where it was claimed the post-16 SEND provision would be just right for him. Within weeks, the college said that they did not have the resources to support him and that he did not meet the minimum grades. He was excluded. Desperate to rescue his future, Sarah is now paying almost £500 a month for private tuition, and that is not the only cost; her son’s removal from full-time education means she no longer qualifies for the child element of universal credit, despite being his main care provider. Sarah is a single parent on a low, part-time income, and these are almost impossible obstacles to overcome. I recognise that this was not the present Government’s fault, but it is now their responsibility.

2.54 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I am limited by time, so I will congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) on securing this debate, and thank all the teachers, parents and pupils who are struggling with this system, and in particular the Brinnington SEND group in my constituency, who I have met on a couple of occasions.

Unfortunately, Stockport is one of the lowest-funded school systems in England. Stockport has a higher proportion of EHCPs than the national average, and that is causing a lot of issues in our constituency. I receive regular correspondence on that. The number of EHC plans in Stockport has increased by 60.4% since 2019, and Stockport is part of the f40 group, which represents the 40 local authorities with the lowest level of school funding. I highlight that, currently, the lowest-funded authority for SEND receives £950 per pupil, while the highest-funded receives £3,250 per pupil. Stockport receives around £1,100 per pupil for SEND—among the lowest funding nationally. The £1 billion of extra funding announced by the Chancellor in the Budget is very welcome, and we should reflect on the 14 harsh years of the previous Administration and the coalition Government. However, that extra funding must not be distributed according to existing criteria; the funding distribution is unfair, and we need to address that. I thank the Minister in advance for her contribution.

2.55 pm

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. With limited time, I would like to raise a very specific issue. My constituency of Frome and East Somerset falls under both Bath and North East Somerset council and Somerset council, and there have been instances in which children's specific cases, claims or tribunals have fallen between two different systems.

One of my constituents wrote to me about their child, who is 14 and has central nervous system lupus, epilepsy, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and visual and sensory processing disorder. All the child's needs were documented by an educational psychologist, who recommended an EHCP. Despite the medical recognition of the need for an EHCP and despite the diagnoses, Bath and North East Somerset council and Somerset council went back and forth for over a year about which local authority should take responsibility for the EHCP, because the child's parents were separated, with one living in each authority, and the child's time was split evenly between the two. That cannot be an uncommon occurrence, yet there were delays and stress for the family while they waited for their case to come to tribunal. The child's mother estimates that he has missed 1,100 lessons in the 15 months that it has taken to resolve this issue.

Many local authorities are, of course, under immense financial strain and I cannot see how this situation can be resolved until the Government relieve councils by providing extra funding and by making EHCP applications as simple and straightforward as possible. We are better than ever at diagnosing additional needs, but the system is woefully under-resourced to support children to thrive.

2.56 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) on securing this important debate.

When a child lacks, for a single day, the support that they need to thrive at school, that is a day's potential that will forever be wasted. The sad reality for too many children in my constituency is that too many days' potential is being wasted. This Government recognise the need to move urgently on this issue, and the investment of £1 billion into the high-needs block in the Budget and the £750 million for school adaptations must be welcomed, but it is clear, looking at EHCP performance, that specific and focused work is needed. Across the country, just 50% of EHCPs were delivered within the statutory timeframe last year, so this is far from an isolated problem. We need to ensure that we have robust improvement plans for local authorities so that all are achieving the best outcomes and not allowing that national challenge to be an excuse to tolerate failure.

We also need to build out the workforce strategy; I welcome the recent news from the Minister of research commissioned to make sure that we have a good understanding of the drivers of the problem, and of investment in more educational psychologists. We need to make sure that we are thinking through the workforce requirements for EHCPs. It is not always apparent where an educational psychologist is needed and that can delay delivery in those cases where they are not. We need to also ensure that health partners are fully prioritised here; health partners have not always played their part,

and that must end. Fundamentally, we need to make sure that we are meeting needs much earlier, so that fewer children need these assessments in the first place. I know that the Minister shares that ambition and I look forward to working with her to make it a reality.

2.58 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Since I was elected as the Member for Tunbridge Wells, my inbox has been inundated with cases of children who are not having their needs met because Kent county council is failing in almost every regard. In 2020, 33% of EHCPs made the deadline; in 2023, only 13% did. I wanted to go through some examples, but we do not have time.

In September 2022, Kent county council was put into special measures because of significant weaknesses in its SEND services. Those measures were lifted in September 2024, but the Minister for School Standards told me that KCC needs to make further progress and that the Department for Education must still keep a close watch on the council. The next formal review of KCC and its SEND services will happen at the end of this month. I remind the Minister that KCC breaches time limits in 87% of cases, misses out key pieces of information, arranges SEND transport too late and refuses to communicate effectively with parents. In November, I called for KCC to be put back in special measures and I reiterate that call today, not only for the children of Tunbridge Wells, but for all our children across the land.

2.59 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the register of interests as a corporate parent in Lancashire.

In the past six months, I have had to intervene in dozens of EHCP cases. Children in Morecambe and Lunesdale are being held back by the abject failures of the system. We know we cannot fix this in six months—it is a problem that has been building for 14 years—but it is fair to say what the Labour Government are doing, because we are taking action. Stable, longer term funding for local government is absolutely vital to making sure that systems work and changes can be implemented properly.

We are changing the Education Department so that SEND sits with the Schools Ministers, increasing education spending and earmarking £1 billion specifically for SEND and working on public health, including on early intervention and the wider determinants of health and poverty. All these things together will help the SEND ecosystem. I hope to goodness we can get it done quickly enough for my constituents because they are suffering right now.

3 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for securing the debate. Parents in my constituency of Surrey Heath will know all too well the failures of Surrey county council to deliver an effective SEND system. In 2023, only 16.2% of EHCPs were issued in the statutory 22-week period. Even though Surrey county council now celebrates a frankly miraculous rise to 70% issuance of EHCPs in the statutory 22 weeks in the

latter half of 2024, parents tell me that those EHCPs are coming back with the wrong name or date of birth, describing the wrong conditions and offering inappropriate packages of support. It is, of course, parents, families and children who suffer the consequences of that.

My constituents tell me that some of their children have attempted to take their own lives. Other parents have had to leave full-time employment in order to become permanent carers for their children, which is bad for them, their family, their family finances and the economy. Timeliness and quality are not mutually exclusive, and they are essential components of good EHCPs. Our children deserve better, as do the families, the educators and the professionals who are becoming permanent advocates on their behalf.

3.2 pm

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): In the interests of time, I will just endorse so many of the comments made today. It is fantastic to see the passion and commitment of so many Members here, as well as the passion and commitment that the Government have shown since day one of our coming into office.

In the interests of time, I will focus down on just one issue. My constituency of Rossendale and Darwen spans two local authority areas: one is the small unitary authority of Blackburn with Darwen, and the other is the shire county of Lancashire. One hundred per cent of my EHCP cases are in Lancashire, which demonstrates a stark and completely unacceptable postcode lottery.

There is no doubt that money is a fundamental issue, but we also have to raise a question about to what extent culture, attitudes and systems matter. Time and time again I hear from families who feel that the whole system is set up to fail and to stop them from getting these plans. As well as addressing those fundamental funding issues, I hope that, as a Government, we will address the cultural, systemic issues by giving our families, in Rossendale and Darwen and in all of our constituencies, the support they desperately need.

3.3 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for securing this important debate. Every time I talk to a parent whose child has special educational needs in my constituency of Eastleigh, they tell me that they spend a huge amount of time fighting for the support their child needs, including EHCPs. One mum told me about the difficulties she was experiencing trying to get an EHCP for her nine-year-old son. She said she felt powerless battling a system that was slow, unresponsive and incredibly difficult to navigate.

In the end, after doing everything she could to get her son back in school, she had to take her case to a tribunal, adding to the stress on her family. Thankfully, her son was granted an EHCP, but it should not be the case that parents have to fight a broken system and go through a tribunal just to get their children the education that they deserve. EHCPs were designed to provide tailored support, but they can only succeed if there is an end to the postcode lottery and the system is properly funded, staffed and focused on the needs of children and their families.

3.4 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. From visiting schools across my Bolton West constituency, I know how much concerns around special educational needs and disabilities play on the minds of teachers, teaching assistants, parents and school governors. Only last week I was with Chris Howarth, the head at Washacre primary academy in Westhoughton, and Phil Orth, the chair of governors. They took me through a tour of their school and outlined the work they are doing to support children with special educational needs, and the challenges that staff manage in the classroom. I want to put on the record my thanks to Chris and Phil, plus all the staff and governors at Washacre primary, for their hard work.

Bolton has 8,961 children and young people diagnosed with SEND, which is a 20% increase over the past seven years. The number of EHCPs has nearly doubled since 2018 to nearly 3,645 across the borough. The council's compliance in issuing EHCPs within 20 weeks has increased from 38% in 2023 to 71% in 2024. Although the direction of travel is positive, that means one third of parents and children are being still being let down. With that in mind, I welcome the Government's new investment in family hubs and early years, with the Chancellor's autumn Budget in October setting aside £1 billion in additional funding for SEND support, and I thank the Minister for her continued endeavours in this regard.

3.5 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Only 49% of children in Buckinghamshire receive their EHCP plan within the statutory limit, which means that more than half are waiting way beyond that time frame. There are hidden impacts to those delays: one family in my constituency faces a three-year waitlist for autism spectrum disorder and ADHD assessments. They have serious concerns about their current accommodation, but the lack of diagnosis for their son is delaying their eligibility for suitable housing. That is three years in unsuitable housing with no additional support.

I have spoken to schools in my area that say they have children with EHCPs who would be better served in a specialist setting. The demand for places means that they remain in mainstream education, where, in the words of one local headteacher, that the SENCO workload is unsustainable for staff.

The Department for Education's own survey showed that only 63% of classroom teachers felt able to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. I am keen to hear from the Minister on what work is ongoing to help give the current teaching workforce the training and confidence they need to meet the demand in our mainstream schools.

3.6 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): The last Conservative Education Secretary described SEND as a "lose, lose, lose" situation and, under the previous Government, she was right. I have a case in Stafford, now my constituency, where two parents are moving house to a different area with their two children who have additional needs. One child has an EHCP and the other is in a mainstream school. For their child with an EHCP, they are being told that, although they are moving from Stafford to

[Leigh Ingham]

Cheshire, they will have to retain a place in their current school, which is around an hours' drive each way. The other child, who attends a mainstream school, has had her pick of schools, has chosen where she would like to go, and is looking forward to her future. The child with an EHCP has been left in limbo.

The difference in experience for those children is night and day and the stress it has caused their parents is completely unnecessary. That is precisely why we need to change the way that EHCPs are handled. This Government cannot undo the last 14 years of disruption to our SEND system in six months, but the investment we have seen recently is incredibly welcome, and I look forward to the Minister telling us more about that.

3.8 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) on securing this important debate. I will not repeat what colleagues have said about the impact on children, but will instead talk about the impact on teachers.

The current EHCP system is grossly unfair to teachers who are expected to cope. I recently visited the Gattons infant school in Burgess Hill. As an infant school, it has only three school years. Four-year-olds arrive there with clearly unmet needs, and they quite often leave the school before the EHCP has been processed by West Sussex county council. That is clearly unfair on those children, and it is clearly unfair on the children who do not have special educational needs or are not yet diagnosed. It is unfair to expect teachers to be able to cope with a classroom of 30 children, a significant number of whom have needs that are not being met. In conclusion, it is absolutely essential that this is turned around with urgency, and I thank the Government for all that they are doing.

3.9 pm

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for securing this important debate today.

To be frank, SEND support in Hillingdon is poor and getting worse. In Hillingdon, there has been a 40% drop in the number of families getting their determination for an EHCP within the 20-week statutory limit since 2015. The situation is worsening. Conservative funding cuts locally, a lack of planning for specialist school places, rising demand and a shortage of specialists have all contributed to increasing waiting times and poor provision. Unfortunately, the situation is only going to get worse. Hillingdon council is proposing a £7 million cut to local schools this year and potentially next year, which goes against the principles of mainstream inclusion and collaboration in the education system. It will undoubtedly make the deficit worse. I hope Hillingdon council thinks again and that the Department holds it to account to do so.

I want to raise the issue of homeless and displaced families. I have been contacted recently by a number of families fleeing domestic violence or experiencing homelessness who have moved with an EHCP into the borough, but the borough not taking up its duty of care and providing support. It is simply unfair for families to have to go back to the start of the EHCP process.

We have heard compelling evidence from a number of places. I ask the Minister what support is in place to ensure system improvement and to hold local leaders to account, so that children in Hillingdon will no longer be failed.

3.10 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for securing this debate.

My surgeries are full of distraught parents of SEND children. In Surrey, 1,800 children are missing education because they cannot get provision. Children are waiting an average of two years for an ADHD diagnosis. Surrey is at the bottom for getting EHCPs in on time and near the top for the number of parents going to a tribunal. Educational psychologists are assessing children by Zoom, sometimes not even meeting the child. Children are in the wrong tier and in tribunals possibly because it costs less in the short term. There is a lack of places in both specialist and mainstream environments. Money is diverted from schools' budgets, and therefore from all children. So, yes to root and branch reform, and proper funding. Surely there must be Government accountability for local authority provision when we are so poorly served in Surrey.

3.11 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) on securing this debate.

In my constituency, more than 100 children and young people classified as in elective home education, which includes 30 with EHCPs. We know there are many more who are unaccounted for. There must be a question mark as to whether home education is a genuine choice, or is due to the child not getting the support they need. One family in Scarborough reluctantly withdrew their child from a mainstream school as their needs were not being met, despite their having an EHCP. The child's mother had to give up work to home school, which took a toll on her health and the family finances.

I warmly welcome the Government's commitment to address the SEND crisis, but I would like to encourage the Minister to use the register of children and young people not in school, proposed in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, to gather the evidence we need to understand why those children and young people are not in school.

3.13 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for bringing this important debate.

Like many, I have spent considerable time with leaders of local schools and parents who have told frankly harrowing stories about children's needs not met and resources at breaking point. In my constituency, 23% of children have special educational needs. Although the council has made great strides to get children on to the EHCPs they need, at one stage 88% were waiting more than 20 weeks.

I want to bring up two things that parents have brought to me. Even once they get the EHCPs in place, they are poorly constructed. One parent said that they are not worth the paper they are written on. Parents are told that there are no resources to deliver the support that their children need. One parent was told she needed £25,000 a year of one-to-one support for her child but was offered only £6,000 a year by the council. They lack planning and the follow-up that parents need to deliver the support in their local schools. A second significant feature is the impact on the educational outcomes and mental health of the children who are not receiving the support that they need.

As we have heard from other hon. Members, several have attempted suicide. In almost every case we have had, the children have ended up referred to child and adolescent mental health services, with serious mental health issues. School absenteeism is increasing, with long-term knock-on effects. As a result, parents feel punished for a system, when they really just want the best for their children and feel they have to fight all the time. I welcome the Government's focus—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. I call Charlotte Cane.

3.14 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) on securing this debate.

Like many others, I am horrified by the amount of correspondence I get about this issue. Just this month I was contacted by a constituent with a child who was well supported in school and was looking to do well in their GCSEs, but the school can no longer provide for them and they now get only 11 hours of tuition. The school asked three times for them to get an EHCP assessment, and they were always refused. My constituent went to a tribunal, at which point the council finally said it would do the assessment. That was last September, and it has still not been done. That child is now unable to access the education they need to achieve their full potential.

Parents and other responsible adults spend time, energy and even money trying to get the support that their child needs. Local authorities deliver what they can, building up vast debts that are currently hidden from their accounts, and their staff feel under siege. The correspondence often lacks clarity and transparency, let alone empathy. Most importantly, children and young people are let down day in, day out by the very structures that are supposed to help them to achieve their potential.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members to bob if they wish to speak so that I can work out exactly how long they have.

3.16 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): In the seconds available to me, I cannot do justice to the cases I have heard of pupils and parents who are stuck in the system.

Ten years on from the passing of the Children and Families Act 2014, it is time to look at where the current system is failing. Local authorities had additional responsibilities loaded on to them, and at the same time they had powers and resources taken away. It has become harder for them to plan shared resources, and that is a major cause of delays and cost increases in the system.

I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a member of the GMB. We cannot lose sight of the role of school support staff in this equation. I appeal to the shadow Minister to please rethink the opposition to reinstating the school support staff negotiating body. Classroom-based school support staff spend the majority of their time supporting SEND learners. We cannot resolve the SEND crisis without resolving the workforce problems.

I am proud to have been a SEND pupil. I am open about my differences as an MP. I hope that, on a cross-party basis, we can look back at the end of this Parliament and say, "We found a system in crisis, and we changed it."

3.17 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): This crisis is failing children, exhausting parents and overwhelming schools, not least in my constituency of Epsom and Ewell. Over the past six years, Surrey county council's timeliness in issuing EHCPs within 20 weeks has plummeted from 57% in 2017 to 16.2% in 2023.

An excessive focus on meeting deadlines appears also to have undermined the quality of the EHCPs. Decisions are increasingly being appealed, and parents in Surrey won 98.3% of appeals last year. Local headteachers have highlighted to me that EHCPs often do not accurately reflect the children's needs, leading to inappropriate placements. The children often become dysregulated and disruptive, which affects staff wellbeing and the learning environment for other pupils. The headteachers also reported that some assessments are being conducted remotely; how can a child's needs be accurately captured through an online assessment?

Parents are increasingly asking headteachers to exclude their children, believing that that might be the only way to secure appropriate care. That is a devastating indictment of the system. The system is failing at every single stage, leaving children and families in absolute crisis. Without urgent reform, we risk failing a generation of children. Every child deserves a chance to succeed, and it is our responsibility to ensure that no child is left behind.

3.18 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for securing this debate. As she said, Essex county council is one of the worst-performing local authorities in the country for delivering on EHCPs. It is vital that we hear from the frontline—from parents, teachers, educators and assessors. I recently held a roundtable on these issues in Colchester with those groups, and I am delighted to say that the participants are now sharing their experiences through an Education Committee inquiry. I urge the Minister to pay close attention to that evidence and those voices, and to make the change that we so badly need.

3.19 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. Well done to my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for securing this debate.

The cost of SEND provision for Wokingham borough council is incredibly high. This has a huge impact on our council's budget and frequently contributes to parents' expectations and, sometimes, elements of the EHCP not being met, with all the consequences that come with that. Despite costs rising, Wokingham borough council is set to lose another £1 million of funding under the current draft local government settlement scheme, when Wokingham is already the lowest-funded unitary authority in England. What are Ministers' thoughts on how the Government can help councils like Wokingham? Will the Minister meet with me and representatives from Wokingham borough council to discuss the challenges we face locally when it comes to funding SEND provision? Are there any plans to review the process of producing EHCPs to make them more user-friendly, thereby leading to greater efficiency and effectiveness?

3.20 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for securing this debate. It is very encouraging to see so many parliamentary colleagues present, although I must comment on the notable absence of those who should be here and be held accountable.

I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which recently published a report on support for children with educational needs. I observed the process closely and was deeply saddened by what we found over the course of that inquiry. I represent a constituency that is 69% Somerset and 31% Devon. The Somerset side, with a Liberal Democrat-controlled council, issues 42.1% of EHCPs within the 20-week requirement. The Devon side, which has a Conservative-controlled council, only manages less than 5%. The Government, in consultation with local authorities and those who use and rely on the system, need to urgently review the infrastructure to support EHCPs, the systems available to assess and issue them, and what future provision in the system will look like, so that we can start to get this right on a regional and national level.

3.22 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) and refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Conservative-controlled Norfolk county council is failing too many SEND children—moreover, the Conservative Government failed SEND children—but the system is also failing children and families, and Norfolk wants to be part of the solution. There are many settings that are worthy of national best practice exemplification for the way they support a high incidence of SEND without needing to refer to EHCPs. The council is keen for the Department for Education to use Norfolk as a test bed for innovative solutions to the crisis in SEND, and our county is keen and eager to be a

big player in the national conversation about the important transformation that must come to the way in which these services currently function.

I would be incredibly grateful if the Minister took the time to meet with me, Norfolk county council and others to discuss the challenges we face and, more importantly, how we can help. I have pledged to those who have got in touch to tell me their stories and challenges in the SEND system that I will keep fighting for them.

3.23 pm

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) for securing this important debate.

I welcome the drive for diversity in our mainstream schools, but we also need to make sure that we provide specialist provision for our children. I draw the Minister's attention to a primary school in my North Cornwall constituency that has had to repurpose its staff room for two year 7 SEND students who currently do not have a school place. I do have some good news, though: we have a new SEND school coming to Bodmin, which will hold between 60 and 70 students. But with hundreds on the wait list that will barely touch the sides.

Briefly, I want to mention one student on that list, James. He has endured delay after delay, with no clear answers, no certainty and very little support. His mother got in touch with me in a desperate plea for help, saying:

"The system is utterly devastating for young people", adding that her son "has been completely let down."

James's parents are now looking to see whether they will have to sell their house to pay for private schooling provision. Funding is key to this. Cornwall ranks 142 out of 151 in per pupil funding, and Cornwall council currently has a £41 million deficit for SEND.

3.24 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq.

The current system is creating a horrendous conflict environment and a depressing, stressful professional working experience for teachers and support staff. Parents are spending their lives fighting, costing their own mental health and livelihoods, and councils are on the brink of resisting because they simply cannot cope with more. Far from early diagnosis adding to the strain, we believe that more investment can save money, reassure parents and ensure that schools and councils understand better the needs of the children who come through the system.

I have been contacted by so many parents, but I want to share what Rachel from Wimborne told me. She said:

"As a preschooler, there is a chance to give my daughter a full education, but the Dorset Child Development Centre is drowning in referrals, with a two-year wait for speech and language referrals."

Her mum is a teacher, and she said:

"The red tape around autism and other neurodivergent conditions is ridiculous. Why do they have to go to the CDC when their needs are so severe that it is obvious to other educational and health professionals?"

I have sent the Minister details of an exciting pilot scheme at Broadstone middle school, and I look forward

to hearing about a meeting soon. Does she agree that SEND children are entitled to the same quality of life and happy childhood as everybody else?

3.26 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I join my colleagues in commending my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) on securing a debate on this important topic. I agree that it is good to see so many people here from the Labour and Liberal Democrat Benches but, as they say on Radio 4, it creates a challenge of delivering my remarks in just a minute.

According to Oxfordshire county council, in the last 10 years in the county of my constituency the number of EHCPs has doubled from 3,000 to 7,000. The deficit of high-needs funding in Oxfordshire is estimated at £21.3 million, but that is in the wider national context of an estimated £3.16 billion deficit in England. Although the £1 billion extra allocated by the Chancellor in the Budget is welcome, it clearly does not go far enough.

I will use the example of St Blaise primary school in Milton to show the wider context of some of these problems. The school was bitterly disappointed to hear that it could not access mental health support teams, but, in an example of the postcode lottery, children just a few minutes up the A34 are able to access that support. The child and adult mental health waiting list is ever growing and feels out of reach, making it difficult to provide wider support for children.

I join my colleagues in calling on the Government to tackle the crisis in SEND funding by giving local authorities extra funding. Please do that to support our children, our parents, our teachers and their assistants.

3.27 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq.

In my constituency of Stratford-on-Avon, I have heard from numerous parents and carers how they are constantly battling to get their children assessed for EHCPs. Some are waiting years. That leaves families in limbo, often forcing them into lengthy and stressful tribunal processes. With schools unable to meet the needs of children, they are left without educational support while they wait for their assessment.

We urgently need a long-term funding plan for the whole SEND process from early years to post-16 education. We need robust accountability for local authorities and sufficient school places supported by well-trained staff to ensure that all children, no matter where they live, can access the education they deserve.

3.28 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Thank you for accommodating me, Dr Huq.

Education should not be this devastating or exhausting, but that is what all our constituents feel when it comes to finding adequate provision for their children with specialist needs. I will talk about one specific aspect. It is not about the exhaustion of actually getting an EHCP, although that is devastating for families. When armed with an EHCP, as in the case of one of my constituents, the exhaustion began in trying to get the

school where their child was enrolled to agree to the one-day-a-week provision they had identified as being suitable for their child. It was the first step in getting their child back into that school, yet the school could not or would not agree to allow that provision to be paid for under the EHCP.

This is about not just fixing the bureaucracy around EHCPs, but ensuring that the support and encouragement are there for our schools to meet the educational needs that parents know are right for their children.

3.29 pm

Jack Abbott (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Dr Huq, for your excellent chairship, which has allowed everybody to contribute.

This is a national issue, but SEND services in Ipswich and Suffolk have been in a desperate state for more than a decade. Like everywhere else, we need specialist places and specialist professionals. We welcome the massive boost in funding provided by the Government.

However, as hon. Members from across the room have said, culture and accountability are crucial. One way in which we can start to inject a bit more accountability and scrutiny into the system is to hold a review of the ombudsman process, which Members have described today as combative, complex and exhausting for so many families. In particular, tribunal hearings are held in public only in exceptional circumstances. Given that around 95% of tribunal hearings, if not more, find in favour of the families, all cases should now be heard in public. I urge the Minister to look not only at the ombudsman process, but at those tribunal hearings.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

3.30 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) on securing this important debate.

Parliament has had a number of debates on SEND since the general election, and every one I have attended has been a blockbuster—an absolute sell-out, with people struggling to get in. I say to the Minister that that is a testament to the fact that pretty much every Member—this is why I am so shocked that there are no Conservative Back Benchers present—has an inbox full of heartbreaking stories of families up and down the country who are trying to access the support that they deserve and need. These are some of the most vulnerable children in our society, and it is incumbent on us to ensure that they get the support they need.

Today's debate is specifically about education, health and care plans, which were introduced in 2014. The vision behind them was to bring health and care together into one plan that would follow the child up to the age of 25, while being regularly renewed and updated. It would set out the support needed and provide assurances to the parents and the pupil involved. However, as we know far too well—we have heard the stats today—the system has become overwhelmed, demand has soared and resourcing has not kept up with that demand. The whole system is creaking at the seams.

[Munira Wilson]

For too many children with SEND, as well as their parents and carers, just managing to get an EHCP will feel like a significant victory. Their families fight their corner, knowing that without an EHCP, the support their child needs will not materialise. However, even when an EHCP is granted, it is not always a guarantee of support. Certainly in my casework, the issue is less about the waiting times and much more about the delivery of what is laid out in the plans. That is partly because of the severe shortage of special school places across the country. The previous Conservative Government promised a number of additional special schools, but they were very slow to deliver them. I welcome the measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that will allow local authorities to open special schools where there is need. A number of local authority applications have been rejected in recent years.

In the meantime, without specialist provision, the cost of transporting children well out of area to appropriate provision, or sending children to independent special schools, some of which are private equity run and profiteering at local authorities' expense, is shocking. A number of children with special needs are missing from school because their needs are not being met.

We have heard so much today about the delays, fights and conflict. Parents should not have to go through that process and the stress and strain that it causes them. It is unacceptable that almost every EHCP appeal that goes to tribunal is decided in favour of the appellant. Parents are carrying the cost and stress of that battle and local authorities are spending further millions losing those cases.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) talked about the impact of delays on school staff, as well as on parents. When I speak to school governors, headteachers and teachers in my constituency, I hear time and again that while children who perhaps should be in a different setting are waiting for an EHCP in a mainstream setting, sometimes their behaviour causes safeguarding issues for other children. Sometimes teachers, teaching assistants or learning support assistants are injured in the process, as my hon. Friend pointed out. Learning support assistants are paid a very low salary, and they are often driven out of the profession.

Some of the delays, as a number of hon. Members have commented, are caused by a shortage of educational psychologists. Talking to my local authority, I also hear that sometimes the delays from its side are because of a lack of co-operation from NHS partners. I support new clause 3 to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford tabled to ensure transparency on local authorities' timeliness with EHCPs. I urge the Government to go one step further and say that, where there are breaches, we need an explanation; we need transparency on where delays are being caused, because we know that sunlight is the best disinfectant. We must put pressure on all partners in the system to keep to their responsibilities and ensure that every child gets an EHCP in a timely manner.

We have heard in this debate that this waiting game is a real postcode lottery. Some local authorities perform reasonably well against the 20-week limit, but we have heard that in Surrey, just 16% of EHCPs were issued on

time in 2023, and that in Essex it is less than 1%. That is shocking. We have heard time and again that the system is failing and needs urgent whole-system reform. That reform must include addressing the financial barriers and disincentives that prevent children from being identified, included and supported without having to fight for it.

That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for increased funding for local authorities to reduce the notional amount that schools are expected to pay towards supporting a child with special needs before applying for an EHCP. That would be an important step, because too often I hear from headteachers in my constituency who are trying to do the right thing that parents have come to them because someone from a school down the road has whispered in their ear, "Well actually, if you go to that school, they are much better at delivering for SEND children." That comes down to the fact that so much of the support needs to be delivered out of schools' budgets, because we know that the £6,000 threshold is only notional. We need to address that disincentive in the system.

The Minister was disagreeing when my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford said that school budgets are being strained further still by teacher pay rises having to be found out of efficiencies. The Secretary of State has written to the School Teachers Review Body saying that pay rises will need to be found out of school efficiencies. I can tell the Minister—she has met some of the school governors in my constituency—that our schools do not have any efficiencies left. Our schools are asking parents to buy glue sticks, they are cutting teaching assistant posts, which is affecting special needs provision, and they are cutting school trips. They have cut, cut, cut, so there is no fat in the system. If her vision is to make our mainstream schools more inclusive, that has to come with the financial support to deliver it, and delivering teacher pay rises out of those budgets is just not possible. I hope she will address that point.

I urge the Government to consider establishing a national body for children with very high needs, so that we do not have a postcode lottery in which, if there is a particularly high needs child in one local authority, their budget is put under significant strain. We need a dedicated national body for those children. We also need to improve early identification through better training of staff. Early identification needs to start right down at the early years, not late in primary school or even secondary school, as we often find.

I have one last point to make to the Minister: we must provide clarity to local authorities. We know from the National Audit Office report that the finances of 43% of them are on the brink. A £3.3 billion deficit is projected. The £1 billion announced in the Budget is welcome. We have still not heard how that will be allocated. It will not even touch the sides of the black hole I have just mentioned. We know that the statutory override—an accounting trick that allows local authorities to keep their SEND deficits off the balance sheet—is due to end in 2026, but we do not know what will happen after that. Perhaps the Minister can provide some clarity on that.

As I said, the Minister met some of my school governors, and we are very grateful to her for that time. We discussed mainly the SEND issues that they are experiencing. I know that this is high on her list of issues to tackle, but I say to her again that this issue is

urgent. There is nothing really in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to tackle this issue. We need whole-system reform. Our children cannot afford to wait.

3.40 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as ever, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) on securing this debate and on her excellent speech.

It is obvious from everybody who has spoken how much distress the delay in EHCPs is causing across the system. What is equally striking is the postcode lottery. We know that 15 local authorities completed less than 10% of their new EHCPs within the 20-week time limit, while 27 local authorities completed over 90% within 20 weeks. That is a stark difference, which I have not seen properly explained anywhere. I hope that as part of the work the Minister is doing in the Department there is some analysis of why the differences are so big. They cannot be explained away just by volume.

Obviously covid has had a huge influence, but the problems we are discussing are not new. In 2009, in the final report of his inquiry, Brian Lamb called for a "radical overhaul" of the SEND system. He cited a culture of low expectation and a system that failed to deliver what children needed.

The coalition Government, who have been referred to by a couple of Members, brought forward the Children and Families Act in 2014, which tried to address some of the shortcomings. It included changes that I think most Members would agree with, such as bringing together the education and health system, trying to make it more child-focused and getting parents to have more of a role in decision making. It was intended that needs would be identified earlier, but Ofsted's SEND inspection found that many local authorities struggled to implement the changes properly, which led to the huge postcode lottery we have seen. Layered on that has been the explosion of numbers post covid. Many children with complex needs did not attend school during covid and missed the support at school, Ofsted found, which has led to some of the distressing cases we have heard about today.

In government we increased the high needs budget by more than 60% from 2019 to 2024, but we are still seeing these huge issues. There is something that I would be interested to know from the Minister. The previous Government pledged the improvement plan for SEND. I completely understand that the Minister has delayed this to have a look at it further, but can I ask about the timetable for bringing forward an alternative and what she plans to do with that?

The hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) talked about the school support staff pay negotiating body. One of the concerns I have about its reinstatement, and the reason we have opposed it, is that it will affect SEND provision. The Confederation of School Trusts said:

"School trusts do not all operate in the same way, and we must ensure that schools"

of

"all types...can benefit from the flexibility to deploy support staff...that most benefits pupils. The reforms so desperately needed to our special educational needs system rely on this, for example."

Laurence Turner: Will the hon. Member acknowledge that the CST said it is the right time to take school support staff pay out from under the local authority umbrella, and that its concern was that a ceiling would be set on school support staff pay? It has been clarified in the Employment Rights Bill Committee that that is not the case; the policy is about establishing a floor, not a ceiling.

Laura Trott: I acknowledge absolutely that pay was part of that, but it was also about terms and conditions and flexibility, which I do not think we have seen adequately addressed to date. I am grateful for the engagement on these issues from the hon. Member and the Minister. It is really important that we get this right, because we will need extra flexibility as we go through with the reforms that the Government will, I hope, be bringing forward.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford discussed the Minister's approach to mainstream education and the recognition that mainstream education is not right for every child. While it is always right and proper, if parents want to send their child to a mainstream school, to give them the opportunity to do that and there should be the facilities there for that to take place, parents should also have the option of a special school if that is what they prefer. We have heard a lot about mainstream schooling; I completely understand that and I support it where it is the parents' wish. But can the Minister confirm that the Government support special school places and will increase their number if that is the parents' wish? Some groups are concerned about being forced in one direction rather than the other, but I think choice needs to be at the heart of this system, so I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that today.

I have questions about the statutory override, which were raised by the Lib Dem Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). I would be grateful if the Minister responded on that as well. I am conscious of time—

Helen Hayes: Will the shadow Minister give way?

Laura Trott: I was about to wrap up because I am conscious of time and I want to ensure that the hon. Member for Chelmsford has time to speak at the end of the debate, so I will close my remarks there.

3.45 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) on securing this important debate and commend all hon. Members for their powerful contributions. They are great in number and their time was short, but their voices were very much heard, and they have been listened to. They have done their constituents, who I know are facing significant challenges on this issue, justice today.

Improving the special educational needs and disabilities system across the country is a priority for this Government. That includes improving the experience of the education, health and care plan process for children and young people and their families. We are clear that the SEND system requires reform, and we are working with families, schools, local authorities and partners to deliver

[*Catherine McKinnell*]

improvements so that children and their families can access the support they need. There are no quick fixes; some of the issues are very deep-rooted in our system, but we absolutely agree that change is needed urgently. As a Government who are absolutely committed to breaking down barriers to opportunities for all children and young people—indeed, all people—we believe the way to achieve that is by ensuring that children and young people get the right support to succeed in their education. The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) asked whether I agreed that these children and young people should lead happy, fulfilling lives. Absolutely I do.

More than 1.6 million pupils in England have special educational needs, and as one report after another tells us, the SEND system is not providing the support that they and their families need. Although high needs funding for children and young people with complex special educational needs and disabilities continues to rise, confidence in the SEND system remains very low. Tribunal rates are increasing, as are waiting times for the support that children and young people desperately need and deserve. Worst of all, outcomes for children with special educational needs are suffering. Just one in four pupils achieve expected standards at the end of primary school—that is out of all children—and children who have special educational needs are falling behind their peers, struggling to reach expected levels in fundamental reading, writing and maths skills.

We are committed to changing the system. Families are, we know, battling against it at the moment to get support for their children. We are determined to restore parents' trust that their child will get the support they need to thrive and flourish, regardless of their additional needs or disabilities. We—the Government and I—understand this cannot wait. We will act urgently to improve inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, while also—to answer the question from the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott)—ensuring that special schools can cater to those with the most complex needs.

Effective early identification and intervention are, I absolutely agree, key to reducing the impact that a special educational need or disability may have in the long term. This Government know that, and it is why last July we announced the extension of funded support for 11,100 schools registered on the Nuffield early language intervention programme, helping pupils who need extra support with their speech and language development to find their voice. We are also investing in the system—£1 billion in the special educational needs and disabilities system, and £740 million for councils to create more specialist places in mainstream schools—and our curriculum and assessment review is looking at the barriers that hold children back from having the best chance in life.

We cannot do this alone, though. We will continue to work with the sector to ensure that our approach is fully planned and delivered together with parents, schools, councils and the expert staff who we know go above and beyond to support children. I repeat, there are no quick fixes here, but we are getting on with the job and remain committed and determined to deliver the change that children, young people and their families are crying out for.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I appreciate the work that the Minister is doing to address this issue and that there are no quick fixes, but given the terrible cases we have heard today—I have constituent who had to wait two years for an assessment, which spanned the whole length of their GCSE courses—does she agree with those who point out that the funding allocated so far will, given council debts, hardly touch the sides in terms of the SEND capacity that is needed?

Catherine McKinnell: I will talk about how we are seeking to address this. I appreciate the extent of the challenge that the hon. Gentleman raises. The fundamental point here is that the additional funding being spent is not actually achieving the outcomes that children deserve. That is why we need to reform the system fundamentally, to improve both the process for families and children and the outcomes for children.

The number of education health and care plans has increased year on year since their introduction in 2014. As of January last year, nearly 600,000 children and young people had an EHCP. The plans were introduced as a way of minimising the bureaucracy and time-consuming nature of accessing vital support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, to allow them the opportunities they deserve to achieve and thrive.

Over time, however, flaws and lack of capacity in the system to meet lower level needs has added to the strain on specialist services and had a detrimental impact on those who are trying to access support through the EHCP process. As many hon. Members described, that has led to late identification of need and intervention, low parental confidence in the ability of mainstream settings to meet need, inefficient allocation of resources in the system, and inconsistency in practice and provision based on geographical location. All of those problems have contributed to pushing up costs and creating an increasingly unsustainable system.

The latest data we hold shows that in 2023 just 50.3% of new EHCPs were issued within the 20-week statutory timeframe. As the hon. Member for Chelmsford set out, this problem is much worse in some areas, leaving children, young people and their families for weeks, months, and in some cases years, without appropriate and adequate support.

The Government want to ensure that EHC needs assessments are progressed promptly and plans issued quickly to provide children and young people with the support that they need so they can achieve positive outcomes. We are aware that local authorities have felt this increased demand for EHCPs and the subsequent demand for workforce capacity increases, and we recognise that more efficient and effective service delivery and communication with schools and families is pivotal to both rebuilding and reforming the system. Department officials are continuously monitoring and working alongside local authorities to support those who are having difficulty with timely processing of EHCPs. For those who struggle to process and issue EHCPs within the 20-week statutory timeframe and face challenges in making the improvements required to do so, the Department continues to put in place recovery plans with the aid of specialist SEND advisers where necessary.

The Government are absolutely aware of the challenges that families are facing in accessing support for children and young people through this long, difficult and adversarial EHCP process. Independently commissioned insights that we published last year show that extensive improvements to the system and using early intervention, which the hon. Member for Chelmsford mentioned, as well as better resourcing of mainstream schools would have a significant impact on children and young people with SEND who are in need of support. The insights showed that those changes could see more children and young people having their needs met without the need for an EHCP, and within a mainstream setting rather than a specialist placement. As well as that, we have listened to parents, local authority colleagues and partners across education and health and social care. We are considering carefully how to address and improve the experience of the EHCP process and reflecting on what could or should be done to make it more consistent nationally.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford rightly says that early intervention is a priority, and we absolutely agree. Children's earliest years make the biggest difference to their life chances. We recognise the importance of high-quality early years education and care, which can lead to much better outcomes for all children. Having access to a formal childcare setting allows these needs to be identified at the earliest opportunity. It means that appropriate support and intervention can be put in place so that children with special educational needs and disabilities can thrive.

We have introduced additional resources for early years educators to support children with SEND, including a free online training module and SEND assessment guidance and resources, and we are reviewing the SEND funding arrangements to make sure that they are suitable for supporting children with SEND. This week we published the updated operational guidance alongside detailed case studies of good local practice to provide more detail to support local authorities and promote greater consistency.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford highlighted the broad specialist workforce that is needed across education, health and care. We know that far too many children have been waiting for speech and language therapy. To support the demand, we are working in partnership with NHS England and funding the early language and support for every child programme, trialling new and better ways to identify and support children with speech and language and communication needs. The programme is being delivered through nine regional pathfinder partnerships through our SEND and AP change programme. We know that continuing to build the pipeline of language and speech therapists is essential, so we have introduced a speech and language degree apprenticeship. It is now in its third year of delivery and offers alternative pathways to the traditional route.

Finally, although most education, health and care plans are concluded within a tribunal hearing, I have heard concerns from hon. Members about the process. We want all children and young people with SEND or an AP to get the support they need when they need it, which is why we are strengthening the accountability in mainstream settings to make sure they are inclusive. We are working with Ofsted and supporting the mainstream workforce to increase their expertise. We will also increase mainstream capacity by encouraging schools to set up their own SEND provision units, and we are supporting teachers with training so that every teacher is a special educational needs and disabilities teacher. Again, there are no quick fixes, but we are getting on with the job on multiple fronts.

I thank the hon. Member for Chelmsford again for securing this important debate, and I thank all who contributed today. Reforming the system and supporting children and young people with special educational needs to achieve and thrive and regain the confidence and trust of families are the goals we all share. My final word goes to all those working across education, health and care. In the interests of our children and young people with special educational needs, I thank them for all they do. Together we can deliver for our children and young people, including those with SEND.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I call Marie Goldman to respond briefly to this epic debate.

3.58 pm

Marie Goldman: Thank you, Dr Huq. I am not sure I thanked you for your chairmanship earlier, so I thank you now. I also thank all hon. Members who took part in this important debate and contributed, in some circumstances, harrowing stories. I do not have time to go through them all. I will simply say this.

I first heard about this subject and the terrible state that special educational needs provision was in at around this time last year. A parent raised it with me and told me what was going on. When I started digging into it, I learned that parents just did not feel heard; they felt that nobody was listening to them. Any parent and anybody involved in education who has been battling this issue can see in the debate here today that we are listening now. We will keep holding the Government's feet to the fire and making sure that they make progress. I very much hope they do—indeed, I have faith that they do indeed want to make progress. I thank Members again for taking part. I hope we make progress very soon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for education, health and care plans.

New Hospital Programme

4 pm

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

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the New Hospital Programme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq, for a debate that is very timely in the light of the statement of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care this week. My remarks will focus on three hospitals that serve my constituency as part of the East Sussex healthcare NHS trust: Eastbourne district general hospital and Conquest hospital, which are situated outside my constituency but are major secondary care providers for my constituents, and Bexhill community hospital.

As part of the new hospital programme announced by the previous Government, Eastbourne district general hospital is due to be entirely rebuilt, and Conquest hospital is set to be reorganised and the structure improved to ensure that it is fit for the future. Alongside creating additional in-patient wards and improved parking facilities, the plans include expanding the emergency departments at Eastbourne and Conquest, improving access to cardiology and ophthalmology services, and redeveloping out-patient theatres, endoscopy and diagnostic services.

Plans to upgrade Bexhill community hospital are also included in the programme, equipping it to deliver more services locally. Currently, only 53% of space in the hospital is allocated to clinical space. Once that work is complete, that will increase to 70%. To reflect increasing demand for care, the plans will also increase the number of hospital beds by 13%, the number of single rooms as a proportion of hospital space from 18% to 70%, and the number of out-patient consulting rooms by 28%.

Having worked in the NHS as a doctor in A&E for a number of years before becoming an MP, I know the difficulties that can arise from working in buildings that are in need of improvement. The physical infrastructure of the building is outside the control of frontline staff, so they often have to do whatever it takes to make it work, but it would be better if they did not have to. I think the Minister would agree that despite those circumstances, our healthcare staff work tirelessly, and we owe it to them to deliver better infrastructure.

Whatever the new Government may say, progress on the new hospital programme was being made under the previous Government, despite the challenges presented by the pandemic and the inflationary pressures on construction costs as a result of the war in Ukraine. The programme was incredibly ambitious but remained a significant commitment to investment in hospital infrastructure.

During the 2024 general election, the Labour party committed to delivering the new hospital programme. Candidates up and down the country made pledges to deliver on the programme, but this week, the Health Secretary broke that pledge at the Dispatch Box by

moving the goalposts, as a result of which many constituents in Bexhill and Battle will not see the benefits of the programme until 2039 at the earliest.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I declare my interest as a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital, and that a family member has shares in a medical company. My constituents are heartbroken by the Government's decision to push the start date of the Royal Berks's construction to 2037, which will disappoint patients and staff. The hon. Member must recognise the role that his party played in creating that situation, so does he agree that his party needs to reflect on its part in the delayed new hospital programme, and will he apologise for it?

Dr Mullan: It is a 30-minute debate, and I want to be generous in letting hon. Members make short points in support of their hospitals, but I do not want to allow it to degenerate into a highly political back and forth. As I was saying, the Government pledged to do it and they did not.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr Mullan: In a moment.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Mullan: I will.

Mr Mohindra: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely debate. As he will know, Dean Russell, the former Member of Parliament for Watford, was a keen advocate for Watford general hospital. He continued to make sure that we progressed the project for that hospital, which has a real impact on my constituency of South West Hertfordshire. Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that Watford general is now not likely to get spades in the ground until 2032 at the earliest? Furthermore, some of the figures being bandied about are concerning. I know that the Minister has uploaded draft costs, but £1.5 billion to £2 billion seems a bit high for what was initially proposed.

Dr Mullan: I share that disappointment, which relates to some of the remarks that I will go on to make about how those costs will go up with the delays, because of the inflationary pressures globally.

To address the concerns about our role in the process, I remind the Minister that the Chancellor was specifically asked during the election campaign about commitments that were being made on tax and spend. She was also asked whether those commitments would have to change when Labour was in government, because of the fiscal challenges that she had not known about—

Helena Dollimore *rose—*

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Dr Mullan: I will not give way yet.

Yet that is exactly what the Government have done again and again, breaking not only that pledge but a series of pledges they made during the election—that they would not say in government that they had been forced into a particular situation. That was the Chancellor's

specific pledge. It was clear from the Secretary of State's statement this week that the Government intend to continue making the issue a political football.

I will reiterate the important context behind the challenges that we are seeing in NHS capital backlogs. When we came into Government in 2010, £1 in every £4 being spent by the Government was borrowed, which was clearly unsustainable. If the Labour party thinks that its current economic inheritance presents challenges for public spending, let me remind it of what we inherited. Unemployment was higher; inflation was higher; the deficit, or the black hole as Labour Members like to call it, was higher; and economic growth was lower. Even in that context, however, we prioritised NHS spending.

Helena Dollimore: I thank the hon. Member, my constituency neighbour, for giving way and I congratulate him on securing this debate. We both care deeply about our three local hospitals and I, too, pay tribute to the work of our amazing NHS staff. Recently, I was at one of those local hospitals with a family member and I will be there again next week.

Does the hon. Member agree, however, that when Labour came into office, it was confronted with the fact that the Conservative Government had not budgeted for the new hospital that they had promised for our community, and that the money for it had run out in April? If the Conservative Government had been serious about committing to the new hospital programme, they should have budgeted for it. The new Labour Government have provided that funding and put in place a realistic and honest framework for our communities that sets out when we will get that work done.

Dr Mullan: Governments make choices. I have just laid out the economic situation that we inherited, which was worse than the one Labour has inherited, and yet we prioritised NHS spending. Nobody forced Labour to give above-inflation pay increases to a number of public sector workers and enormous pay increases to train drivers, or to make a significant but unwise investment in the green investment plan.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Dr Mullan: I do not have to let anybody intervene, but I will let you intervene to make a point about your hospitals. If there continues to be a back-and-forth, I will not let anybody intervene—this is my speech and I will make my points.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. We have had the word “you” a few times, which refers to me as the Chair.

Dr Mullan: There is not time for a continual back-and-forth in a 30-minute debate, so I will make some more progress.

When it comes to comparing the record of the NHS, the performance of the NHS under Labour in Wales, across many of the metrics that Labour Members have criticised us for, is actually worse than the record of the NHS elsewhere. That is because across England, Scotland and Wales—this is why I hope we can come to some agreement—we not only had the pandemic but face an increasing demographic challenge.

The SNP, Labour and the Conservatives, in the three areas in which we respectively have responsibility for health, are seeing considerable challenges that all of us are struggling to manage, as the Labour party will now struggle to manage them. As was the case when Labour was last in office, capital spending is often deprioritised when budgets are challenged, and decisions are made that might make sense in the short term but that also create long-term pressures.

The issue that we are debating is nothing new. Members from both sides of the House agree that our hospitals need modernisation, with 42% of the NHS estate having been built before 1985 and 14% of the estate pre-dating the NHS.

Perran Moon *rose*—

Chris Vince *rose*—

Dr Mullan: I will give way to the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon), who stood up first.

Perran Moon: I thank the hon. Member for giving way. I appreciate that he does not want this debate to be political, but so far it has been all about politics. If we want to have a debate about the state of the NHS and how we transform it, it must be a level debate.

In Cornwall, we have one general hospital, but we are very fortunate that it is in the first phase of the programme because it is a women and children's unit, which we have a desperate need for. It was originally promised by the former Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, more than 10 years ago, but nothing came to fruition. We have been waiting a long, long time for it.

I fully accept that government is about choices. We have had to deal with—whatever we want to say; however we want to position it—a number of different challenges since we came into government—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. The Clerk is frowning at me, because this is a bit long for an intervention.

Perran Moon: Does the hon. Member agree that we now have a coherent programme—however long it is for—to implement those changes?

Dr Mullan: That remains to be seen; we will have to see what the Office for Budget Responsibility says in March about the planned public expenditure limits.

To be clear about taking interventions, I am very happy to debate things, but this is a 30-minute debate in which the primary focus is on the person who secured the debate. The Minister will get a chance to make those repeated points, so I will not let anyone else make another intervention. I was happy to let people make interventions, because I am keen for you all to champion your local hospitals, but if you are not willing to play ball with me—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. Avoid the word “you”—that is one to steer clear of.

Dr Mullan: I apologise. If Members are not willing to go along with that courtesy, I am afraid that I will not continue to take interventions. I have tried to be fair and decent.

I hope that the Minister will at least be shorter on rhetoric and longer on the details of what will actually happen than the Secretary of State was. That brings me back to my local hospital and what happens next. Shortly after the election, I attended a briefing with East Sussex healthcare trust, which I am proud to say has made incredible improvements over the past 10 years. Despite being in what it described as a challenging financial position, it has reversed its special measures and improved standards across the board.

The hospitals under the trust are crucial parts of our local healthcare services in East Sussex and have served the community for decades. Each year, they carry out over 160,000 emergency attendances, 56,000 planned surgeries and 438,000 out-patient appointments. It is also important to remember that those hospitals are not just healthcare providers but job creators, employing around 8,700 people locally.

However, East Sussex healthcare trust was clear that the remedial works due under the new hospital programme could not be delivered soon enough. When the programme was announced in 2019, the trust estimated that the total backlog rectification cost throughout all its hospitals was over £300 million. Its critical infrastructure risk was the 10th highest in England, and was estimated to represent around £64 million of the £300 million total required to resolve the backlog. If left untouched, it is estimated that that figure will rise to £220 million over 10 years.

Given the disappointing decision to delay the major infrastructure investment that would have addressed the situation, what is the plan now? How will the Government now ensure that those sites can continue to function effectively? I am grateful to the Minister for her time in our previous interactions, but I ask her to explain in detail how the Government are going to manage those issues. The trust is now working at pace to try to develop a better understanding of the impact of the decision and the possible mitigations. What support is being put in place by the Department and NHS England to assist hospitals in that work?

Tackling the colossal backlog of repairs is not enough to equip such hospitals for the 21st century. The way that we deliver care has drastically changed since they were built. A new hospital is not just a new building; it is more than just bricks and mortar. It is about rethinking traditional and outdated models of care to reflect the changing needs of patients. Hospitals in East Sussex have been assessed as having a digital maturity level of zero. That must be addressed if the Government's ambition of a digital revolution is to be realised. The layout of the hospitals is simply not designed for modern healthcare, with far too few single rooms to meet demand, which leaves hospitals poorly equipped to effectively control infection and unable to offer patients privacy and dignity when they need it most.

Those issues are more pronounced when we enter the winter months, with the UK Health Security Agency reporting a sharp increase in the number of patients admitted to hospital for flu and other respiratory diseases. As the Health Secretary mentioned last week, there are 5,100 people in hospital with flu, which is more than

three times the number at this point last year. That is only compounded by the UK's ageing population, which is often described correctly as a demographic time bomb, as in the next 25 years the number of people older than 85 will double to 2.6 million. In East Sussex alone, the population is expected to increase by 14%, with significant growth in the over-70s demographic. As that comes to pass, healthcare needs will become more complex and the demand for services will continue to grow.

I have been working with a number of GP practices in my constituency to help bring to fruition their plans to move to larger, more modern premises. As such, I am encouraged by the Government's £889 million of extra funding for general practice. From that work, I know that a significant barrier to those projects being delivered is the rising cost of construction. I was informed by Rother district council that construction costs on its joint projects have increased by approximately 40% since 2020.

Those issues underscore how critical the rebuilds are to East Sussex healthcare trust, as well as others across the country, to deliver the best healthcare outcomes for patients and future-proof our NHS. Although financial prudence is essential, the Health Secretary's delays only escalate construction costs and deepen the strain on our healthcare system. Investment now will save money and lives in the long term. Instead, the Labour Government have delayed plans—admittedly ambitious plans—and kicked the can down the road. The decision to delay schemes in East Sussex will have consequences for patient care, NHS staff and public trust.

Without urgent interim funding to address those issues, patient safety and care standards will be at risk. I call on the Minister to secure dedicated resources to tackle the new challenges in maintenance and capital spending created by the Government's decision, and ensure that hospitals can continue to serve the community safely and effectively while we wait for the new promised facilities to materialise. Delay must not mean deterioration, and I urge the Government to act now to protect both patients and NHS staff.

4.14 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) on securing a debate on this important matter. I commend his timing in getting this debate two days after an announcement that nobody else knew about. If he were a Labour MP, there would be howls of "Fix!"

There has been a lot of back and forth, but I want to confirm that we pledged to support this programme, and we are supporting it. That is what Monday was about—let us be in no doubt about that. I was part of the largest capital programme in the NHS when I served as a non-executive director under the last Labour Government; this will be the next largest capital programme, delivered under this Labour Government.

As Lord Darzi noted in his investigation, the hospitals that we rely on are deteriorating after the NHS suffered years of under-investment. This Government inherited a programme to deliver new hospitals that was unfunded beyond March 2025 and was repeatedly delayed, with no credible delivery plan.

Chris Vince: I thank the Minister for the Secretary of State's statement on Monday, in which £1.5 billion of Government funding was dedicated to Princess Alexandra hospital. At my local hospital in Harlow, it is not just an issue of funding: in fact, the land was not purchased and the business plan was not completed. The idea that the hospital would be completed by 2030 was a pipe dream, was it not?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend; I am happy to take interventions, but I need to finish by half-past 4, so I am conscious of time. He is absolutely right, and I will come on to his point.

We need to be very clear and honest with people about what was ready and about the different stages of these programmes, which we are very keen to do. Staff and patients deserve better. That is why the Secretary of State asked officials to review the programme and put it on a firm footing with sustainable funding so that all the projects can be delivered.

I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle for his service to the NHS and his experience. I agree that it is appalling for staff. We all understand that he and I disagree in our political analysis, but he made some really well-informed points about models of care and future models of care, all of which we need to take into account in the delivery of this programme and other parts of the capital programme—and we will.

As the Secretary of State announced to the House on Monday, we now have a realistic plan to deliver the programme. I am pleased that we can be honest with people as we start a new chapter setting out a new commitment to deliver these hospitals, which are so important to all our constituents, that is realistic and backed with funding. We have worked closely with the Treasury to secure five-year waves of investment, backed by £15 billion of investment over consecutive waves, averaging £3 billion a year. This will ensure a balanced portfolio of schemes at different development stages being delivered now and into the future.

The new delivery plan sets out the order and the waves of investment in which each new hospital will be constructed. Hospitals included in a wave will begin construction, while forthcoming schemes will be undertaking pre-construction work to prepare planning permission and secure business cases. With this approach, we can ensure that schemes are ready to be built as soon as possible. A list of the schemes in each wave has been published on gov.uk and in the plan for implementation.

For reference, I will briefly outline the timeline for delivery. *[Interruption.]* Actually, I think we have seen all the waves, and the hon. Gentleman wants us to move on to Bexhill and East Sussex.

Mr Mohindra: For Watford general hospital, we have a window between 2032 and 2034. Given the certainty that the Minister is trying to give to the programme and to the rest of the country, what assurances and assumptions has she made for that two-year window? How can she assure me and my constituents that there will be no further delays?

Karin Smyth: I will pick up that point. Wave 3, which is what the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle has secured this debate on, includes schemes that were always part

of a post-2030 plan. We now have the confirmed dates. The East Sussex new hospital scheme for East Sussex healthcare trust includes, as the hon. Gentleman says, new buildings and refurbishments at Eastbourne district general hospital, Conquest hospital and Bexhill community hospital. The scheme is in wave 3 of the delivery plan, and construction will commence between 2037 and 2039. We understand that this is disappointing news to some people who were expecting and were told that their hospital would be built earlier, but we can assure them that there is now a credible and funded plan for delivery—no more false promises. Our priority now is to get on and deliver these new hospitals for the benefit of the staff and patients who so vitally need them.

We understand the importance of these schemes to local communities and the need to invest in health infrastructure. We will continue to engage with trusts—including Watford, which the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) mentioned—over the next few years to establish whether there are any other activities that can be progressed during the spending review. We will be in discussions with all those trusts to understand mitigations in the meantime. That was the source of many questions that came up in the many meetings that I held with hon. Members yesterday. I understand that all these hospitals are critical—they would not be on the list if there were not a major problem with them—so we need to talk to the trusts about how we manage the process in the meantime.

I acknowledge that this will be a difficult time for the core teams and all the people who have been working on these schemes, many of which will be stood down. Their expertise and knowledge is extraordinarily valuable. I know that the programme teams will make efforts to ensure that expertise is retained where possible and used to develop the wider programme.

The trust is currently developing its strategic outline case, as per the business case process set out in His Majesty's Treasury's Green Book. Following the review and approval of the SOC, the next step will be the development, review and agreement of the outline and full business case. I understand that many areas, including Bexhill, have plans for housing to accommodate a growing population. My Department will work closely with integrated care boards and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that those communities have the health provision that they need.

Beyond establishing a credible programme, we are taking steps to restore people's trust through honesty and transparency. We will be setting out further information for each scheme shortly, to ensure a more open way of working and collaborative programme delivery.

Yesterday, I held meetings with Members of Parliament from all waves of the process to give them the opportunity to ask more detailed questions about their individual schemes, and to give them the clarity that their constituents deserve. Letters have also been issued to the trusts. That was a very successful way of working; I certainly learned a lot about the individual schemes. Members of Parliament of all parties came to talk about their schemes. I gave a commitment that I would continue to talk to colleagues about them. I absolutely offer the same to the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle. I will work with Members' trusts to understand the detail on the ground.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I warmly welcome the news, on which I congratulate the Minister, that the women and children's hospital at Treliske and the emergency care hospital at Derriford are in wave 1. However, some of my North Cornwall constituents rely on the crumbling North Devon district hospital, which is potentially 15 years from a rebuild. We are talking about mitigations, so please will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can expand care at the community hospitals in Bodmin, Launceston and Bude, which are all at least one hour from their closest district hospitals?

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We had a good discussion yesterday about North Devon; I understand the rurality of that location, as it is fairly close to my Bristol constituency. Obviously, however we manage it, there are a lot of schemes represented by a lot of MPs. I am open to suggestions about how we go forward. I hope hon. Members feel that we have tried to give as much information as we can to them and the trusts in the announcement and the meetings yesterday. That is the spirit in which we will continue.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I welcome the spirit of openness and transparency that the new leadership of the programme has demonstrated. Previously, and frustratingly, residents in Hillingdon were—to be frank—led up the garden path. We were left with all but an IOU note for £750 million for a new hospital. The revenue funding for the new hospital ran out this year. We were pleased to see it renewed, and to be in wave 1; a significant capital investment of more than £1 billion has been committed to.

This is complicated: it is hard to deliver projects at this scale. With the best will in the world, if another £20 billion were to appear, despite the Conservative party opposing any methods that would raise money, the construction sector would struggle to build all these hospitals at once. Is it not the case that it is challenging to deliver this project at scale? Will the spirit of openness and transparency continue?

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued campaigning on behalf of the residents of Hillingdon; I used to be one of them. Talking to people is really important, and we have learned a lot from it. In case I have not outlined this enough, let me be clear that all our constituents who are on the programme are in severe need. The programme has looked at clinical need and deliverability. We understand how difficult these choices are, so I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

Helena Dollimore: I welcome the Labour Government's confirmation of funding, which will help the Conquest hospital in Hastings, part of the East Sussex Healthcare trust, and other hospitals that my constituents use. It comes alongside the Chancellor's announcement of a big package of support in the Budget, with record investment in our NHS to provide more appointments to clear the backlog left by the Conservatives.

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, which highlights the point that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle raised about other capital plans and programmes to help his constituents and others over the coming years.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue.

Clive Jones *rose*—

Dr Mullan *rose*—

Karin Smyth: If the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle, whose timing is superb, wants to make an extra point, I will give him the courtesy of a chance to come back in.

Dr Mullan: In the last hour, I have had a communication from the trust explaining that, with the delay, the extra cost may be in the hundreds of millions. I would be grateful to take up the Minister's offer of some time, as well as to talk to MPs who use those services, to see how we can help the trust to access that funding.

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. We learned a lot yesterday from the expert team from the new hospital programme; I thank them for their incredible work in getting to this point. Those colleagues who could make the meetings yesterday found that the team's knowledge about every single programme was phenomenal. I have yet to ask the team a question about any scheme to which they do not know the answer—I give hon. Members that confident assurance. The team includes colleagues from both NHS England and the Department.

When I went to an assurance meeting a few weeks ago, I learned that the relationship between the central control of the programme and the trusts, how we get the schemes delivered for everyone's constituents, and the value of parliamentarians talking to me—everyone has stopped me in the corridors to raise these issues—are all very valuable. That is a good function of parliamentarians. That is the spirit in which we want to continue.

Our commitment is to deliver these hospitals, including the Eastbourne district general, Conquest hospital and Bexhill community hospital schemes, and I am pleased to say that we have an affordable, deliverable plan to do so. It will be difficult, but I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle and other colleagues.

Mr Mohindra: It is very gracious of the Minister to allow me to intervene again. In the interests of full transparency, can she assure us that if the development of the new hospitals gets delayed, all MPs will be informed, not just those in the relevant constituency? Work on Watford general is meant to begin between 2032 and 2034. Will the Government communicate any further delays as quickly as possible? That will certainly be critical to our constituents.

Karin Smyth: We absolutely will. This is one of the advantages of the waves: we recognise, and everybody knows, that there are sometimes unavoidable delays to schemes, perhaps to do with the sites, but the advantage of the pre-construction work and our knowledge of the sites is that most of that should be built into the programme and the timing. But life happens.

One of the central issues for the programme is capacity in the construction arena, as well as across the country, in terms of developing primary estate to get these things

done. The advantage of the waves is that they give us flexibility if things move, as they inevitably will—that is life. We very much want to keep up relationships with local trusts and inform them. That will be difficult, as my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales) says, but that is the spirit in which we want to continue. I give him and other colleagues that absolute commitment.

Question put and agreed to.

Certificate of Common Sponsorship

4.30 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of Government support for a certificate of common sponsorship.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. Before I start, I pay tribute to Unison South West, which has been at the forefront of this campaign. It has a number of care workers and members in the Gallery to listen to the debate.

The stark reality for migrant workers in the UK is that they are under-protected by our employment rights framework and victimised by our immigration rules. Migrant social care workers are particularly vulnerable to this kind of ill treatment because of the hostile environment in which they find themselves. Any worker who challenges bad practices by their employer puts their ability to live and work in the UK at great risk. This is a real danger in a sector with high levels of staff turnover. It is fragmented and privatised, characterised by many small employers running on tight profit margins—some of the profits are extracted from the companies for shareholder dividends. This important debate therefore draws attention to the power that employers are given by our visa system.

As the visa sponsor, employers have ultimate power over the lives of workers. Unscrupulous employers have greater powers over migrant care workers, because their work visa is tied to their employment status. If they lose their job, they will lose the right to work and live in the UK. The only way to avoid that currently is if they can find another job with an eligible social care employer within 60 days. As migrant workers, they are not eligible for any kind of support if they are dismissed. Many employers are well aware of the fear and vulnerability that these workers experience and do not hesitate to use threats to secure their compliance.

The sponsorship relationship with the employer is particularly harmful in the social care sector. As many Members will know, the care sector is one of the most precarious sectors in the UK. Firms regularly go under or lose their council contracts. The consequence is that staff find themselves without work and in financial hardship. For migrant care workers, the situation is even worse. Workers are fearful of raising concerns about employment practices, because they know that the same employers can remove their visa sponsorship. Unscrupulous employers can use the threat of removal to a care worker's home country to victimise migrant workers who whistleblow or complain about their treatment.

Workers do not only risk deportation by speaking up or challenging an employer. Many face total financial ruin in their home country, because they have sold all that they have to come here, and illegal recruitment fees demanded by predatory recruitment agencies are rife in the sector. According to the Work Rights Centre, one in three people on the health and care worker visa said that they had to pay a large recruitment fee to secure their sponsorship. The value of fees averaged £11,000. The latest report from the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority indicates that the care sector is the most reported sector for labour exploitation, making up 60% of all reports. The most common vulnerability

[*Neil Duncan-Jordan*]

to exploitation indicated by potential victims of forced labour is being tied to a visa under the existing sponsorship system.

The Care Quality Commission has noted that workers are being exploited through the immigration system. Research last year by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre found that the current visa system creates hyper-insecurity, which increases workers' vulnerability to exploitation. Workers routinely suffer low wages, high recruitment fees, inappropriate salary deductions and the threat of deportation.

One care worker, who wishes to remain nameless, said:

"We are not treated with dignity at all. Last month I was paid just £1,300 with no explanation as to why my wages had been reduced. Most carers are scared to take their leave for fear of losing shifts and when you get sick, the company deducts money from your salary".

One of my constituents in Poole, Nicola, explained that many sponsors have failed to meet their promises of providing adequate hours, which leaves workers in precarious situations. This not only undermines their rights, but often subjects them to poor working conditions and substandard housing.

Some of the stories these workers tell are truly heartbreaking and highlight clear violations of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. For example, many migrant healthcare workers are expected to sign contracts containing draconian clauses which often include a requirement to pay back recruitment and training costs if they leave their posts within a few years. Workers have effectively been blackmailed into staying because their employers have threatened them with a large debt should they leave. Migrant care staff have also been invoiced for administration costs. One employer billed staff £65 an hour for meeting and greeting a new employee at the airport when they arrived in the UK. Another worrying trend is workers being charged fees that the Home Office explicitly forbid employers to pass on. These include the immigration skills charge that the Government require employers to pay when they agree to sponsor a worker from overseas.

Government interventions to address these issues have failed thus far. In 2023, the then Government announced that care providers could only sponsor migrant workers if they were undertaking activities regulated by the CQC, but this failed to recognise that many registered companies were already exploiting their workers. In 2024, a rematching programme to help workers find another sponsored role when things went wrong was symbolic of acting after the problem had arisen, rather than seeking to change the structure of the system.

Although welcome, stricter licensing requirements and greater sanctions do not address the fundamental power imbalance at the heart of the employee sponsorship system. That is why I hope the Government will agree to a review of immigration policies that increase the vulnerability of migrant workers to exploitation and modern slavery. Vital to that is a re-examination of the visa sponsorship relationship with the employer in the social care sector, moving towards a sector-wide sponsorship scheme run by an independent body with a health and social care focus. That would enable overseas staff to leave bad employers and find work with better ones.

Sector-wide sponsorship would also mean that workers and employers did not incur new costs every time a worker moved jobs. That would alleviate the pressure on the worker and reduce the impetus from some employers to enforce repayment clauses. Any visa scheme reform will stand or fall on whether it enables overseas workers to live their lives free of exploitation. This requires a fundamental shift in our immigration rules, so that the hostile environment is replaced with a rights-based framework and migrant workers are treated with dignity and respect.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the appalling situations faced by migrant labour in the social care system, as highlighted by UNISON, emphasise the need for urgent structural reform of the system, to create a national care service that resolves workforce insecurity, alongside the many other problems arising from our social care crisis?

Neil Duncan-Jordan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The need for urgent social care reform—and to bring it back into public ownership—is vital, and I will continue to press the Government on this.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I can see that the hon. Member is on his last paragraph. I apologise to him, and to you, Dr Huq—I am chairing a meeting next door, so I will have to leave. I intervene because he mentioned companies going out of business. In my constituency, when Southern Cross went out of business, a range of Filipino workers were left bereft, isolated, and with no income, and had to return home because of the visa situation. The Government's Employment Rights Bill, which is coming before the House, proposes a fair pay agreement in the social care sector—which will be the first element of the reintroduction of sectoral collective pay bargaining—and proposes a fair work agency. That agency could take on the role of monitoring this sector and administer an overall sectoral visa process that could be fairer and regulated.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: I thank the right hon. Member for that intervention. We need to consider how to address this problem in a practical way, and that might be one option.

Introducing a common certificate of sponsorship is not only the right thing to do; it is absolutely crucial to raising standards in the care sector. Overseas workers play a vital role in keeping the sector running. They deserve better protections and treatment, and I hope that the Government will therefore see the merit of introducing a certificate of common sponsorship.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members to stand. We will then work out how much time each Member gets.

4.41 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairwomanship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing this debate.

Two sets of people are being abused and exploited. The first set are workers in the care sector. I agree with everything that my hon. Friend said about the extent of abuse in the sector, and I have seen it myself in my employment law practice. However, I have also always been aware that there was a need for more advice in the sector than we could ever provide, for exactly the reason that he raised: people are too scared to come forward.

The other set of people for whom this situation is deeply unjust are my constituents who receive care, who are spending their life savings on care, and who would be absolutely horrified to discover the circumstances in which many of the people who give that care are living. The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority has talked about this as a massive growth area of concern—I have spoken to the Minister about that previously, in this exact room, so I will not go into precisely the same points again.

The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority could potentially have a licensing scheme for care workers but, bluntly, its licensing schemes in other sectors do not seem to be eliminating abuse, so a certificate of common sponsorship is the way to get better rights and behaviours within the sector.

At the moment, some councils are putting out tenders for care at payment rates of around £17 an hour. Care representative organisations tell me that the actual cost of providing care with staff paid in a legally compliant way is £22 an hour. That does not include any management costs whatsoever; it is just the cost of the member of staff being provided. We have, at minimum, a £5 an hour gap between legally compliant care workers and what local councils are offering, although the gap is more than that because companies will, of course, want to make some degree of profit—that is not, per se, illegitimate—and will naturally need to charge for some management costs. A gap that big is enriching non-compliant employers in the sector. Compliant employers are withdrawing from the market because they cannot manage to compete, or provide services, for the amounts of money available.

There is an urgent need for a wider reform of the care sector, and pay within the sector. We are, of course, all looking forward to sectoral bargaining, to better protect workers and make it clearer to people what their rights are. However, unless workers have the capacity to enforce those rights, and unless they can move between employers as the rest of us can, they will continue to be exploited.

We already have a significant problem in the sector. The problem is getting worse and will continue to get worse but this is, I hope, one of a number of measures that could really improve working conditions for people in this country.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): We said five minutes each.

4.45 pm

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): I am delighted to serve under your chairship again, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing this important debate. Having worked with him on the issue, I know we share a commitment to securing a fair solution for the workers affected by these rules.

As the hon. Member outlined, the situation for people on health and care worker visas is uniquely difficult. The way that visa works puts employees into an incredibly and intolerably vulnerable position. If they lose their job, they lose their right to live and work in the UK, unless they find an eligible alternative employer within 60 days. A survey conducted by the Work Rights Centre found that only 5% of those who tried were successful within that timeframe.

The situation can be even more difficult when, as Unison reports, employers withhold references for employees trying to change jobs. We can see it is really difficult for those workers to change employers. What does that mean? It means that employers hold significant power over their employees' right to live and work here. Their lives are effectively under the control of the employers. That can be disastrous, as it has been found that many employers wield that power to make unfair demands on their workers.

There have been reports of unreasonable demands made under the either implicit or sometimes explicit threat of revoking sponsorship. Employers do not have the right to deport people, yet that is what they are threatening to do. The Royal College of Nursing told us about a member who was asked to work on days she was not contracted to, tried to refuse and was told in reply by the employer, "We sponsor you." That was a clear threat intended to intimidate her into compliance with work outside the contract. That is echoed by a domiciliary care worker from India who told Unison that every conversation they had with managers felt threatening and often ended with the word "visa".

The RCN has also reported threatening tactics being used to get employees to sign new more restrictive contracts, including—shockingly—being given just 30 minutes to sign before having their sponsorship revoked. Care worker Divya told Citizens Advice that she had not been paid in two months, while her British colleagues had been paid as normal. She was falling behind on bills. Having contacted her employer once about it, she was understandably scared to follow up, in fear she would be dismissed. She said:

"I feel like we're being treated as slaves."

There are other horrific examples, such as being given unsuitable and overpriced housing, or finding out that they do not even have the work that was promised when they arrived. Citizens Advice reports that a quarter of the migrant care workers it spoke to were given no work when they arrived in the UK. One in eight contracts were changed on arrival. It is blatantly clear that that is completely unacceptable.

The Government have acknowledged the harm of those rogue employers, and have taken action around increasing sanctions for the breach of rules. However, as the hon. Member for Poole pointed out, those measures do not do enough to address the toxic power imbalance that arises when so much of an employee's life is in the hands of a single employer. In short, they do not prevent this injustice. That is the crux of the issue and must be addressed.

A certificate of common sponsorship would change that. It would mean that an employee's sponsorship would not be chained to a single employer and it would break that exclusive link that is so often exploited. I strongly urge the Government to consider that as a

[Carla Denyer]

solution. We have already had helpful suggestions for how it might work. Then we can empower migrant care workers to demand the fair conditions they rightly deserve.

4.49 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) on securing this crucial debate. Migrant workers are vital to the UK's economy and society. They make up over a fifth of our workforce and support essential industries such as hospitality and social care. Just last week, I had the privilege of meeting representatives from Focus on Labour Exploitation, the Latin American Women's Rights Service, the Southeast and East Asian Women's Association and the Refugee Workers Cultural Association. They voiced serious concerns about the current visa rules that tie many migrant workers to a single employer, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.

The existing legislation not only creates grey areas that allow employers to pay unliveable wages, deny sick pay and encourage abuse in the workplace, but it also strips employees of the agency to challenge those conditions. Many are trapped in a vicious cycle; they are scared to speak out due to fear of arrest, immigration detention or deportation, with no means to move to a safer employer. I fully support our Government's commitment to reducing visa and immigration abuse, and empowering workers to report exploitation safely plays a crucial role in that.

The introduction of a certificate of common sponsorship would enable migrant workers to change employers freely without facing the burden of additional immigration fees, the risk of being unemployed within the 60-day period or jeopardising their visa status. That would empower workers, increase accountability and raise standards for migrant workers, as employers would risk losing their workforce if they failed to treat workers fairly. Such measures will redress the power imbalance between workers and sponsors, giving workers the flexibility to escape exploitative situations and access their rights without fear.

What conversations have Home Office officials had with those at the Department for Work and Pensions on the effects of data sharing and protections against employers using workers' insecure immigration status to threaten and silence them in exploitative situations? The UK's reliance on migrant workers cannot be overstated and all workers' contributions must be valued and protected.

4.52 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for setting the scene so very well. The No. 1 reason why I am here is to support him, and the No. 2 reason is that I want to consider the benefits of the legislative change that he has proposed. Through the Minister, we will see whether that legislative change can be achieved. If we can do that, we can move this forward.

Many firms in my constituency of Strangford have seasonal workers and must complete much paperwork. They go through various loopholes to secure their workers when they simply cannot source labour at home. There is a very clear purpose to that, which can be beneficial for us all. Firms cannot apply for these certificates annually in advance and rather have to wait three months, which is difficult logistically; I believe that an extension to the certificate of sponsorship could and should be considered. I look forward wishfully to the Minister's consideration of what the hon. Gentleman has asked for, and I think this has been a very positive debate.

Seasonal workers are needed quickly, and there should be an easier and more streamlined way for them to access sponsorship, to be gainfully employed and to be able to move through employment. That is why I supported the hon. Member in his call for reform of the tier 2 visa system and the introduction of a certificate of common sponsorship. That is needed greatly within my constituency of Strangford and other rural constituencies. We need seasonal help and an easier and more cost-effective system to navigate. For many, it is bureaucratic—red taped—and we must ensure that that is not the case.

The proposed change would allow migrant healthcare workers, for example, to switch employers within the sector without putting their visa status at risk. That would provide greater job security and better protection from exploitation, which all Members who have spoken have referred to. I am sure that the Minister truly desires that, and I await with great interest the Minister's comments on how we can improve and streamline this process for even more people. I also look forward to the contributions of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart).

The fact is that these people are not coming to claim benefits but to work. Sometimes we should focus on the clear and positive contributions that they can make, often in industries where we cannot find and supply our own workers. I know a number of agrifood businesses that spend a great deal of their resources on filling out the applications.

To be clear, I believe in the visa system—I understand it, I know why it is there and I support it as it is—but I also believe in checks and balances. There should be the ability to offer protection to workers in sectors that are crying out for help. That is why I am happy to support the hon. Member for Poole. It would be a simple and direct change, and one that could make all the difference. I highlight the fact, and make a plea to the Minister, that we still have to get the fishing crew visa situation sorted out. That, too, must be done.

Specifically, I have a plea for the Minister. Over the years, in all my time here—I have been 14 years here as an MP—I have supported our visa system, which has worked. Unfortunately, the previous Government—I am not being disrespectful, just honest—put the threshold up to such a level that those who applied for visas, and the fishing boats who would employ those people, were unable to meet it. If the Minister is happy to do this, and I hope she will be, will she would meet me and some of the fishing organisations to discuss how we can better have a threshold that the fishing boat owners can meet and that gives a living and good wage to the

people who come across? The Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation is keen to find a way forward. Will the Minister agree to a meeting with the fishing sector and me to discuss such matters?

To close, I know that the Minister has a desire to facilitate those who wish to come to work and to add to our economy and community—they do so, and they are positive in their contribution. I believe that this suggestion is one that could safely be taken up to allow sponsors and indeed workers a cost-effective and streamlined approach.

4.57 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing a debate on this issue. We both attended Unison's lobby of Parliament last year, and met migrant health and social care workers on tier 2 visas. Some of the employment practices they had been subjected to were appalling. I completely understand their push for a certificate of common sponsorship.

As highlighted by other Members, existing rules that tie a worker to a single employer create a relationship of dependency and a highly unequal power dynamic. Many health and social care workers on sponsorship visas are afraid to express concerns about their employment and living conditions for fear of losing their employer's sponsorship and being returned to their home country. Often, such workers are in a financially precarious situation, which increases their dependency. Some have been charged by their employer for their job induction, travel or training costs; some have their families with them, too, and in some cases workers receive a salary below the minimum wage to make up the cost of their flights or their training.

A concern repeatedly raised with me by healthcare workers on sponsorship visas in my constituency relates to shift patterns and hours. One constituent described starting work at 5 am and returning home at 10 pm, only to have worked for less than five hours due to the nature of his shifts, which he found financially and emotionally draining. Women might be sitting all day at bus stops and on benches in Cornish villages between their shifts, because their shift pattern has been so difficult to accommodate. Another constituent described employers threatening their staff about taking days off, and the expectation that migrant workers would always have to work bank holidays such as Christmas day. Unison has reported workers doing 19-hour shifts with no breaks, and the council in my area has revoked contracts with some providers for those reasons.

Even in circumstances where workers are not facing poor employment or living conditions, care is still one of the most precarious sectors in the UK, including in Cornwall, where firms regularly go under or have their licences revoked. Healthcare workers who came to the UK on sponsorship visas then only have 60 days to find another job with an eligible social care employer, or they have to leave the country. That short timescale creates stress, uncertainty and financial hardship, which one of my constituents experienced when their sponsoring company's licence was revoked. Some workers in my constituency have gone on to work for the NHS, but having the visas transferred has been incredibly difficult and stressful, even with such a big employer.

A certificate of common sponsorship that is sector-wide, perhaps including health and social care and the NHS, rather than being linked to a single employer, would go a long way to addressing the issues we have all mentioned. It would prevent employers using the threat to withdraw sponsorship as a means of keeping migrant workers in poor living and working conditions, and it would improve job security and financial stability for those workers. That would help retain the desperately needed skilled professionals in the care sector.

5 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing this debate and for laying out some of the problems with the current system very clearly.

The Liberal Democrats are clear in our commitment to reforming the UK's work visa system. We believe in creating a system that supports our country and economy while ensuring that everyone is treated with dignity and respect. The system should be fairer and more humane, and it should allow us to attract and retain the workers we need.

A critical problem with the current system is the exploitation of migrant workers, who are often trapped in vulnerable working conditions that are particularly prevalent in the social care sector. The Liberal Democrats have a comprehensive plan to address that exploitation. We would establish a single enforcement body to combat modern slavery and worker exploitation, a measure the previous Government long promised, but failed to deliver. The body would ensure that all workers, regardless of their terms of employment, are protected from abuse and are treated fairly.

Undoubtedly, the problem has been exacerbated by policies such as the ban on bringing dependants for people who come here on health and care worker visas. This is a cruel measure placed on those working to save lives, and it should be reversed.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I was slightly surprised by what the hon. Lady just said. Can she just repeat, so I understand correctly, that the Liberal Democrat policy is to reinstate the ability for people coming on the health and social care visa to bring dependants, knowing that that on average each person on that visa brought more than one dependant and the ratio was more than 1:1 throughout its operation?

Lisa Smart: It is a delight to welcome the hon. Gentleman's intervention on such an important issue. We would not continue with the current visa structure and I will go on to explain what we would do. We believe, as a number of people do, that the system put in place by the previous Government is cruel. It is cruel for workers to allegedly be welcomed here, but not with their dependants, whether those are children or other dependants. We feel that we should be welcoming to families who want to play an important role in our society, such as by doing the job of a health and care worker—so yes, we would change the policy fundamentally: for a thriving, integrated society we should welcome families, not just workers, on these visas.

We should not forget the extraordinary sacrifices that NHS nurses, doctors and care staff have made and continue to make. I see it for myself at Stepping Hill

[Lisa Smart]

hospital in Hazel Grove, at our nursing homes and care homes, such as Cherry Tree House in Romiley, and with those domiciliary care workers who go into the homes of our most vulnerable neighbours to give them the care that they need. Those workers face immense pressure in the face of record waiting times and difficult, draining roles. The Liberal Democrats have consistently called for better support for those vital workers, including those who come from overseas.

We would exempt NHS and care staff from the annual £1,000 immigration skills charge to recognise the invaluable contributions they bring. We should be valuing and cherishing our health and care workers. The Government should, as I have said, reverse the ban on visa holders bringing dependants with them. The policy needlessly separates families and discourages talented individuals from coming to the UK.

If the previous Government had valued care workers as the skilled professionals that they are, they would not have needed to rely so heavily on overseas recruitment. That is why the Lib Dems propose the introduction of a carer's minimum wage, which would make it easier to recruit and retain domestic workers in this vital sector.

While the introduction of a certificate of common sponsorship may address some issues, we believe the root of the problem lies in our flawed visa system. We Lib Dems are clear: we can and we should have a fair and compassionate visa system that protects workers from overseas—but that cannot be achieved by tinkering around the edges.

Ultimately, the UK needs a flexible, merit-based system for work visas, allowing the Government to work closely with each sector to ensure that those skilled workers will fill the skills gaps in the UK economy. That includes abandoning the arbitrary salary threshold for skilled worker visas dreamed up by the previous Government, which not only drives skilled workers away, but deepens existing workforce shortages, especially in the health and social care sectors. A merit-based system would recognise the unique needs of different industries and the vital contributions made by workers at all levels of the economy. For example, many roles in social care and the NHS are essential, but do not meet the current salary thresholds, leaving critical positions unfilled.

By focusing on skills rather than arbitrary financial benchmarks, we can build a system that not only attracts talent, but encourages long-term retention, allowing workers to build lives and contribute meaningfully to our, and their, local communities. The Liberal Democrats share the goal of creating a visa system that prevents exploitation and fills workforce gaps, but that needs to be done through comprehensive reforms rather than simple, limited measures. A truly effective system must be compassionate, adaptable and designed to meet the needs of workers as well as of our economy. By focusing on systematic change, we can build a visa system that not only protects workers from exploitation, but ensures that critical workforce gaps are filled in a sustainable way.

5.6 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing this important debate.

We are all deeply grateful to our doctors, nurses and care workers. They do rewarding jobs, but their roles can be difficult and gruelling, too. It is true that many people in that workforce are not British but have come to this country to do that work. We must thank them for helping to keep us and our families healthy and cared for. However, it is our role in Westminster to look at the whole picture, informed—but not led—by individual cases, and there is a wider question to address.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) has said, the public have consistently asked successive Governments to lower migration and successive Governments did not deliver. Migration has been far too high for decades, and remains so. That is relevant today, because the volumes of people on the health and social care visa are eye-watering. Since 2021, more people have come to this country under the health and social care route than live in the city of Manchester. Why is that? Because those jobs are tough, yes—but fundamentally because those jobs are underpaid.

The Migration Advisory Committee says,

“the underlying cause of these workforce difficulties is due to the underfunding of the social care sector...immigration could not solve these workforce issues alone.”

This situation is economically self-defeating. There is no question that money the Government save in the short term by underpaying salaries in health and social care is dwarfed in the medium and long term by the costs to the state. After five years, a person who has come here on a health and social care visa can apply for indefinite leave to remain. If they get it—95% of ILR applicants are successful—they will qualify for welfare, social housing, NHS care, everything. All that costs money, far more money than those on these sorts of salaries will ever pay in tax and or than they will save the state with their artificially low wages. This cannot go on.

As the hon. Members for Poole, for Congleton (Mrs Russell), for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer), for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden), and for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) have noted, those individuals are at risk of exploitation. That is a result of the poor pay and conditions across the sector, which have been allowed to endure through bringing in workers from abroad who are willing to accept them as the price of coming here. A certificate of common sponsorship will simply not solve this fundamental problem.

The next related issue with the visa is the degree to which it is abused. The MAC describes “misuse” of the visa as

“a significant problem and greater than in other immigration routes”.

All these issues raise massive concerns about the safety of patients and vulnerable people that the system is charged with caring for. It is awful that that system built up under a Conservative Government.

The change of rules to limit dependants is insufficient to fix the whole problem, but was a substantial step in the right direction. Numbers in the most recent year fell by two thirds. The rules around the health and social care visa need to be tightened further, not loosened through a certificate of common sponsorship, and actually enforced. That is for the good of not only those

healthcare workers themselves, but—as should be the primary concern of hon. Members here—for the good of their patients and of this country.

Can the Minister please confirm that that reform is not under consideration? Can she please set out the discussions she is having with her Treasury and Health Department counterparts about the problem of underpaid jobs in health and social care? Can she please tell us how many migrants on care worker visas the Home Office expects to apply for ILR when eligible? Can she tell us, based on demographic level of income and number of dependants, what the Government expect this to cost?

5.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing this very important debate and thank those who have spoken from the Back Benches, including my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Mrs Russell), for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden), and for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer). Before I make any further comments, I assure the hon. Member for Strangford that I am very happy to meet him, as always, and indeed I will be visiting Scotland to talk about a number of the issues he has raised today.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), made very similar comments to her speech in the last debate that we were in. I think we can all agree that the immigration system needs to be fair, controlled and managed—much better managed than the chaos that we inherited. Many issues in the design of the health and care visa system contribute to the problems we see today. It is important that that is understood and acknowledged in this debate.

I want to make a broad point: although I will hopefully address a number of the issues raised today, perhaps with some more positive input than may have been understood from some of the recent changes we have made, we understand that our net migration does need to come down from the record highs that we saw under the last Government. We have supported some of the rule changes brought in, including the stopping of dependants, which hon. Members will know.

In that spirit, it is important to say that the Government recognise the vital contribution that care professionals from overseas make to our social care sector. We do share my hon. Friend the Member for Poole's concerns about the treatment of international workers in the care sector. A number of the issues they face are also faced by others from within the UK who are working in the same sector, and I will highlight some of the work we are doing to enact reforms that will be in the interests of all in this very important sector for our country.

My hon. Friend secured this debate in support of a proposal by Unison, as he outlined. I thank Unison for the considerable research and work it does in this area. I look forward to meeting the organisation to discuss not just these issues and its proposal, but its wider insights on issues facing workers. I hope that in this debate I can address some of the concerns raised and

set out both what we are already doing, which I think goes quite a long way to addressing those concerns, and why addressing those concerns continues to be a high priority for this Government.

Hon. Members will be aware that in 2020 the previous Government introduced the health and care visa, which recognises the crucial contribution made by our international health and care workers. Those visas involve significantly reduced visa fees, as well as a quicker processing time and a dedicated Home Office team to process applications. Since February 2020, UK employers have been able to use this route to recruit people from overseas to work as carers. Under the previous Government, the number of carers recruited grew beyond expectations, and it is for that reason as well that this Government have maintained the measures the previous Government introduced in the spring of 2024.

The changes brought in by these new visas were stood up at pace by the previous Government to address what had become acute shortages in the adult social care sector. The issues the sector was facing had not been addressed and became a crisis—not unlike other workforce challenges—and they were then worsened by the covid-19 pandemic. The safeguards that should have been put in place when setting up these visas were not as effective as they could have been, and we have seen a range of abusive and exploitative practices in the sector. These have ranged from employers not having the work to fulfil workers' contracts to abhorrent practices such as the housing issues that have been talked about, unfair shifts, pay and documents being withheld, and modern slavery. Hon. Members have also spoken about a lack of dignity, and a fear of taking holiday or sick leave or of speaking up when issues are faced. These are serious concerns and must be addressed.

That is why, in the autumn, I met colleagues in the Department of Health. At that meeting, I discussed these issues and the progress of actions that have already been taken, looking at where we might see longer-term plans for the care sector. As has been referenced in today's debate, the recently introduced Employment Rights Bill establishes a framework for fair pay agreements, through which an agreement for the adult social care sector can be negotiated and reached in partnership by employers, worker representatives and others. That is yet another example of the Government taking steps and actions to address the serious issues that have been outlined. The Minister for Care and I will be discussing these issues further with our counterpart at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, recognising local government's stake in these issues, to understand how our Departments can come together and work more collaboratively.

Although the motion moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole focuses on health and care workers, it is worth mentioning that these issues seem to be particularly prevalent in lower-paying sectors such as care. In other areas of the health sector, the sponsorship system seems to be working well, with little need for significant Home Office intervention. However, I want to set out the steps we are taking to assist affected workers and the action that is already being implemented to tackle rogue employers.

First, we have seen that jobs in the care sector often do not have enough hours to support the workers who have been recruited to come to the UK. It is in no one's

[Seema Malhotra]

interest to grant care worker visas when there is no guaranteed care work for visa holders to come to; that does not support care needs or our constituents, and it can also leave visa holders unable to support themselves in the UK without access to public funds. UK Visas and Immigration is applying the genuine vacancy test with a clearer understanding of the care sector's recruitment processes and practices, to make sure that sponsors prove that the job is required and that they have enough work to ensure that the person will be doing the proposed job and paid the required salary. That is vital, given that international recruits on those contracts do not have recourse to public funds.

In the case of care workers who have come to this country in good faith to support these sectors and our constituents, but who have been left without a licensed sponsor, the Department for Health and Social Care has been working closely with the Home Office to design a process that will support those displaced care workers into new roles within the adult social care sector. Government officials, alongside 15 regional hubs in England made up of local authorities and directors of adult social services, are working together to support displaced workers into new roles. These regional partnerships have received £16 million this financial year to support them to prevent and respond to unethical practices in the sector. That includes providing funding support to help international recruits understand their rights. It also includes establishing operational processes with regional partnerships to support individuals to switch employers and remain working in the care sector in which they have been impacted when, for example, their sponsor's licence has been revoked. We need to build on the progress that has already been made.

It is important to note that, as part of that process, workers in adult social care roles receive a bespoke letter direct from the Home Office that notifies them if their sponsor's licence has been revoked. It also gives them the directions and contacts, so that they can get in contact with their regional partnership hub if they want to secure new employment and new sponsorship. The letter is sent before the visa cancellation process starts and is designed to give workers in adult social care the time to access assistance. I am keen to see the process made quicker, and I will work with ministerial colleagues to ensure that that is the case and that the process is as effective as it can be.

Where a worker believes that they are being exploited, but their sponsor is not yet subject to Home Office compliance action, the Government encourage them to come forward to regional hubs. Although the service is primarily for care workers whose employer's sponsor licence has been revoked, we would expect support to be offered to other care workers who approach those hubs. I understand that some workers will be fearful, but I would encourage them and send them this message: they should come forward to report their experiences and secure help. For care workers specifically, the Home Office will waive priority service fees for applications supported by regional hubs.

Those who have come to the UK legitimately to support our care sector should be given the best opportunity to do so and be treated with fairness and respect. That is why the Government are also stepping up action against

rogue employers. The Government have made clear our intention to crack down on those employers who are abusing the immigration system, and we will prevent them from sponsoring overseas workers. That will benefit all workers across our points-based system.

Let me turn specifically to the issue of employers passing on sponsorship costs to their workers, which has been raised by a number of hon. Members and is an outrageous practice. It has always been the intention that those benefiting from the recruitment of overseas workers should bear the costs of that sponsorship, and the Government believe that to be typical of most good employers. However, there are a small number of employers who have sought to load their sponsorship costs on to lower-paid international workers, and that must be stopped.

I am pleased to confirm that the Home Office has implemented policy changes to address that practice by skilled worker sponsors, including in the health and care sector. Those sponsors are now prevented from passing on the costs of acquiring a sponsor licence or of assigning the certificate of sponsorship, as well as any administrative and legal costs associated with having and using a licence. It is our intention to go further and implement that more broadly across all sponsored work routes.

As we set out before Christmas, the Government intend to go further and ban any employer who flouts employment laws from engaging with the immigration system. Visa and employment laws will be brought into closer alignment. Our sponsorship system will also reflect measures being driven and delivered by our Employment Rights Bill, which is currently going through Parliament. The Home Office will ensure that new protections set out in the Bill and the work of the flagship fair work agency are integrated into the sponsorship framework, strengthening the existing measures designed to prevent the mistreatment and exploitation of sponsored workers.

Although a key objective of the sponsorship system is to ensure that international workers are protected against modern slavery and other labour abuses, the Government recognise that the requirement to be sponsored and the worker's reliance on their sponsor can, in some circumstances, make it more difficult for sponsored workers to change their employer. Those who wish to seek alternative employment can do so if they have a job offer from a Home Office-approved sponsor and make a new application. They are able to do that at any time, and do not need to wait until their sponsor is no longer able to employ them. Individuals have different options, depending on their circumstances, and can seek advice from an accredited immigration adviser.

If a sponsored care worker has lost their job because the sponsor's licence has been revoked, they should, again, contact their regional support hub for assistance, as people who have been the victim of exploitation. The most important thing is that these individuals are supported to use the process and are able to make an application, which will enable them to regularise their stay. Anything short of that risks leaving them in a more vulnerable position, and we want to do everything we can to ensure that that is prevented.

Finally, we are deeply concerned by reports of unethical practices relating to international recruits in the care sector. That is why we are taking decisive steps to address the issue, and why UK Visas and Immigration

continues to investigate and take action alongside partners where evidence of abuse is found. It is engaging with the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and other relevant agencies to hold employers to account, and working with the Department for Health and Social Care to support impacted workers.

In conclusion, we continue to look at the best approaches for the immigration system, but it is important to note that the sponsorship compliance regime has exposed widespread abuse and stripped hundreds of rogue employers of their ability to recruit internationally. The system is therefore key to ensuring that future workers receive the pay and conditions promised when they applied for their visa. Although we recognise the issues raised today, there is also much more work to do urgently to improve the system. We are utterly committed to doing that and to working with colleagues across the House to make those changes and improvements a reality.

5.27 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan: I thank all Members for their contributions to today's debate, which was very positive. I also welcome the Minister's contribution, and acknowledge both her understanding of the exploitation taking place in the sector today and her willingness to address that through existing and future measures.

On regional support hubs, however, the evidence we have heard—that only 5% of people losing their sponsorship are able to gain another role within the 60-day period—is proof enough that the system is not yet working adequately. I acknowledge that there are efforts to be made, but that does not address the problem that migrant workers face. They are in vulnerable positions and precarious employment, and when that is threatened and taken away, it is very difficult to find another sponsor. I would like the Minister to take that on board further.

Finally, my view is that strong trade unions are the key to exercising rights at work. Migrants should be represented in a union in their workplace. We also need a sympathetic legal underpinning that helps individuals and workers generally to exercise those rights. I am hoping that the Employment Rights Bill and other proposed legislation will do that. I am hopeful, ultimately, that the Government will see the economic and social benefit of introducing a certificate of common sponsorship.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of Government support for a certificate of common sponsorship.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 22 January 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Competition and Markets Authority: Appointment of Chair

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): This Government have a clear mission to drive economic growth and aim for the highest sustained growth in the G7. The Prime Minister has been clear that he expects regulators to play their part in delivering these ambitions.

The Government are today announcing the appointment of Doug Gurr as the chair of the Competition and Markets Authority on an interim basis. This follows the resignation of Marcus Bokkerink, which has been accepted by the Secretary of State for Business and Trade. Doug will join the CMA board, working alongside Sarah Cardell in her role as CEO.

The Government are grateful to Marcus for his leadership of the CMA over the last two and a half years and wish to place on the record our thanks for his efforts, achieving the ambitions he set at the start of his tenure and more. All regulators, including the CMA, have a key role to play in driving growth, and this transition will enable a fresh strategic vision at the heart of our competition authority. Doug brings with him experience as an entrepreneur and in the technology and groceries sectors, as well as non-executive leadership, including in artificial intelligence—skills and experience that will be critical as the CMA takes on the challenges of the modern economy. The Government are confident that with fresh leadership on the board, as well as the existing strong leadership and the welcome commitments made by the CMA to supporting economic growth, the organisation will be well positioned to play its part in our collective mission to grow the UK economy.

[HCWS380]

Fire Safety of Domestic Upholstered Furniture

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I am notifying Parliament today of the publication of a policy paper providing an update on progress in reviewing the fire safety of domestic upholstered furniture.

The policy paper sets out important changes we are making now to amend the Furniture and Furnishings (Fire) (Safety) Regulations 1988 (the FFRs), and our plans moving forward.

The regulations were introduced as a safety measure to respond to the increasing number of furniture fire-related deaths from the 1960s to the 1980s. The FFRs have significantly contributed to the reduction in the number of fire deaths since their introduction, but it is important to update the regulations to keep pace with product innovation. Evidence has also emerged over a number of years about the risks associated with the chemical flame retardants used to pass flammability tests.

The paper sets out the Government's intentions for the implementation of a new regulatory approach, highlights areas of broad stakeholder consensus and provides an update on the outstanding challenges. We will work with businesses, trade associations and other key stakeholders this year to finalise key elements of the policy.

Ahead of that work, the Government will act now to remove a number of baby products from scope of the FFRs. The products being removed are not exposed to the same risks of accidental ignition, by cigarettes or similar ignition sources, as the items of furniture that will remain in scope. This change enables us to reduce the risk of exposure to chemical flame retardants to babies and young children at a significant stage in their development, where the fire risk is lower than the chemical exposure risk. The fire safety of these products will still be regulated, by the general product safety regulations.

We will also remove the requirement to attach a display label, reducing labelling costs to businesses without impacting on consumer safety and increase the time limit for enforcement authorities to institute legal proceedings from six to twelve months.

Alongside the policy paper, we will also publish a summary of responses to the consultation "Smarter Regulation: The new approach to the fire safety of domestic upholstered furniture", held last year by the previous Government.

I will place copies of the policy paper in the Libraries of both Houses, and it will be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS379]

TREASURY

Charter for Budget Responsibility

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): Today I have laid before Parliament the charter for budget responsibility. The charter sets out the new fiscal framework announced at autumn Budget 2024.

The new fiscal rules will put the public finances on a sustainable path and prioritise investment to support long-term growth. The charter also strengthens fiscal stability and transparency via a series of reforms including enhancing the role of the OBR in scrutinising the Government's fiscal policy.

In accordance with the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, the charter was first published in draft alongside the Budget on 30 October as it includes modified guidance to the Office for Budget Responsibility. No further changes have been made to the charter since it was published in draft.

A debate and votes in the House of Commons on the charter and the level of the welfare cap, will be scheduled in due course.

[HCWS381]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Future of the Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): The Government are extending the listed places of worship grant scheme until 31 March 2026,

the end of this spending review period. This will continue to enable religious organisations to claim grants covering eligible VAT costs paid towards repairs and renovations.

Nearly £350 million has been awarded under the scheme since 2010, supporting listed churches, synagogues, mosques and temples across the UK. The scheme receives around 7,000 applications a year, of which more than 70% are for £5,000 or less.

Against a tough financial background and bearing in mind a wide range of competing priorities for expenditure within DCMS, we have made the difficult decision to implement an annual limit of £25,000 on the amount individual places of worship can claim in the coming year, and to limit the fund to £23 million. We believe that this will continue the widest distribution of the scheme's benefits within the available means. Based on previous scheme data we expect 94% of claims to be unaffected by this change.

Places of worship are a key part of our built heritage, central to local communities' wellbeing, pride in place and identity. In addition to the benefits to their congregations, listed places of worship often also provide facilities for the wider community including foodbanks, community halls and music venues and rehearsal spaces. I am pleased that despite the challenging fiscal context we are able to continue the scheme for a further year.

[HCWS382]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Post-legislative Scrutiny of the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): The Government have today submitted a memorandum to the Home Affairs Committee regarding post-legislative scrutiny of the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019.

The Home Office has carried out the post-legislative scrutiny, working with key Government and operational stakeholders. The memorandum includes an assessment of how the Act has worked in practice and sets out its findings in a Command Paper to the Committee.

The memorandum has been laid before the House as a Command Paper (CP 1249) and published on gov.uk. Copies will also be available from the Vote Office.

[HCWS377]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Best Value

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): All hon. Members will recognise the importance of having well-functioning local councils that provide essential statutory services that local residents rely upon. To ensure this, we need to get the basics right, resetting the framework to ensure the sector is fit, legal and decent. Government will continue to work directly with a small number of councils in difficulty, and this should be done in a way that is not punitive and is based on genuine partnership to secure improvements.

Today, I would like to update the House on the steps we are taking to improve governance and local accountability in the London borough of Tower Hamlets. On 12 November, I informed the House that I was satisfied, having considered the inspection report of Tower Hamlets council by lead inspector Kim Bromley-Derry CBE DL and assistant inspectors Suki Binjal, Sir John Jenkins and Philip Simpkins, that the council is failing to comply with its best value duty. They found insufficient evidence that the organisation is open and transparent, and values the constructive criticism required to drive improvement. I proposed a statutory support package to secure the council's compliance with that duty, and gave the council until 25 November to make any representations it wished on the inspection report and my proposal for intervention.

I have now carefully considered the representations the council has made. I have also considered afresh the inspection report and have had appropriate regard to other representations that I have received about my proposed intervention. While I am grateful for the constructive engagement I have had with the council, who have accepted the inspection report's findings and are committed to working in partnership with Government to deliver the change needed for local people, I remain satisfied that the council is failing to comply with its best value duty in relation to continuous improvement, governance, leadership, culture and partnerships. I have therefore concluded that it is both necessary and expedient for me to exercise intervention powers in the Local Government Act 1999 as I have proposed, with some minor amendments. Accordingly, I have today given the council the necessary directions under section 15(5) of the 1999 Act to implement the proposed statutory support package.

That support package, to be in place until 31 March 2028, is centred on putting in place a team of ministerial envoys to work comprehensively within the council, acting as advisors, mentors and monitors, to oversee its improvement work. I have nominated Kim Bromley-Derry CBE DL as ministerial envoy, and Pam Parkes and Shokat Lal as assistant envoys—all experienced and talented professionals who understand that transparency and accountability are vital to the functioning of local democracy. Enlarging the team to include two assistant envoys rather than one will bring greater diversity of thought to the team and ensure that their approach to the challenges and best practice for local authorities is current. The envoys will report on the council's progress against its improvement agenda after the first four months, and then regularly as we agree is appropriate.

In summary, the directions I have issued today require the council to:

Work with the ministerial envoys to reconfigure the council's existing transformation advisory board and draw on existing and additional members to appoint independent and external leads for leadership, governance, culture and partnerships.

Undertake recruitment of a permanent appointment to lead the improvement work in the council.

Prepare and agree with the board a fully costed continuous improvement plan, and report regularly and in public to the board on its delivery.

Co-operate with the ministerial envoys and board leads to prepare and implement comprehensive programmes of cultural change and political mentoring, and report regularly and in public to the board on its delivery.

Have regard to, and respond promptly and in public to, any recommendations from the board with respect to the continuous improvement plan and its implementation.

Work with the Local Government Association to agree a follow-up review visit to the 2023 corporate peer challenge.

Report to the Secretary of State on the delivery of these directions, with these reports having been considered by full council, at six-monthly intervals, or at such intervals as the Secretary of State may direct.

I have also directed the council to co-operate with the ministerial envoys, and to allow them all reasonable access to their premises, documents, employees or members in support of their work. The council is also required to pay the envoys' reasonable expenses and such fees as I determine.

This support package acknowledges the political mandate the mayor holds, while recognising the need to tackle deeply rooted and persistent issues. It is designed to strengthen and expand the improvement work that the council has already begun, and demonstrates how this Government are committed to resetting the relationship between local and central Government through genuine collaboration and engagement.

This action is not undertaken lightly, and I remain committed to working in partnership with the London borough of Tower Hamlets to provide whatever support is needed to ensure its compliance with the best value duty. I hope that with focus and oversight, the necessary improvements will come at pace, but I have not ruled out the possibility of further action in the future, in the interests of Tower Hamlets residents, should this prove necessary.

I will deposit in the House Library copies of the documents I have referred to, which are also being published on gov.uk today. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS378]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Liz Kendall): I would like to inform the House that today the Government are taking steps to deliver on their manifesto commitment to safeguard taxpayers' money through the introduction of the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill.

This Bill brings forward reforms to help identify, prevent and deter public sector fraud and error, and enable the better recovery of debt owed to the taxpayer. This Bill is expected to deliver benefits of £1.5 billion over the next five years, as scored by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility.

Fraud against the public sector is a significant and constantly evolving challenge which requires a robust and resolute response. This Government will not tolerate fraud or waste anywhere in public services.

I previously informed the House on 8 October 2024 of the Government's plans to bring forward legislation that will extend and modernise the powers of the Department for Work and Pensions to stop fraud in its

tracks, recover money lost to fraud and, crucially, help protect claimants who may already be on the edge financially from racking up debt. These powers will be tough on criminals, fair for claimants and provide confidence to the taxpayer that money spent is reaching those who need it, and not those who seek to exploit the system.

Fraud and error in the social security system currently costs the taxpayer around £10 billion a year and, since the pandemic, a total of £35 billion of taxpayers' money has been incorrectly paid to those not entitled. This Government are committed to preventing fraud and error from happening in the social security system and, where it cannot be prevented, we will identify those committing fraud and recover the debt owed. Just as we do not tolerate tax evasion, this Government will not tolerate fraud against the social security system.

The DWP measures in this Bill will:

Modernise DWP's investigation powers to help prove or disprove suspected fraud more quickly. Some of the powers which DWP relies on to investigate fraud are over 20 years old—DWP needs to keep pace with offenders who exploit the social security system and improve our access to information. New independent oversight will review and report on the use of the new investigation powers.

Allow DWP to take greater control in our investigations into serious organised crimes through new powers of entry, search and seizure. New independent inspection and complaints procedures will be included to ensure the appropriate use of these powers.

Bring greater fairness to debt recovery by allowing DWP to recover debts from individuals who can pay money back but have avoided doing so. It will also enable DWP to apply to the court for a suspended driving disqualification order, to disqualify a debtor from holding a driving licence, where all other attempts at recovery have failed.

Through our eligibility verification measure, require banks and other financial institutions to examine their own data sets to highlight where someone may not be eligible for the benefits that are being paid. This will help us to identify incorrect payments and prevent debts accruing for claimants. DWP's use of the powers will be overseen by an independent person whose report will be laid before Parliament. The powers will not give DWP access to any claimant's bank accounts, or any information on how claimants spend their money. DWP will not share any personal information with banks or other financial institutions and a member of DWP staff will always be involved in any further investigations and decisions.

Update the penalties regime by extending the penalties we can apply for fraud to non-benefit payments—for example, grants—to ensure there is fairness in dealing with fraud across the social security system.

Introduce new and important safeguards on the face of the Bill, including reporting mechanisms and independent oversight to ensure the powers are used proportionately and effectively. As is the case now, any decision taken about someone's benefit entitlement will always be made by a human being.

We will ensure that every pound of taxpayers' money is spent with the same care with which working people spend their own money.

Today I can also confirm that this Bill will now go further to tackle fraud, error and debt across the public sector by also giving the Public Sector Fraud Authority within the Cabinet Office powers to investigate and address fraud against the public sector on behalf of other departments and public bodies. These powers are

based on similar powers held by other Government Departments, specifically His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions. The public sector response to fraud and error has historically focused on the areas with the highest known losses—generally tax and social security. This remains a priority. However, this focus has meant that some Government Departments have limited powers and resources to act on fraud and error. As a result, outside of tax and social security at least £3 billion per year is being lost to fraud and error.

Fraud against the public sector remains unseen, and all too often, those who attack our public services for their own gain face limited consequences, but it is not a victimless crime. Public services suffer, and the taxpayer is the victim. These losses are unacceptable, and waste enormous sums of public money that could be put to good use to improve lives. It is essential that all parts of Government have access to the capabilities and tools required to tackle fraud, error and debt.

The PSFA—within the Cabinet Office—measures in this Bill will:

Give the Cabinet Office information sharing and information-gathering powers that will enable the PSFA to compel the production of information from information holders as part of a fraud investigation.

Allow the PSFA to take control of investigations into public sector fraud at the request of the affected public authority, reducing reliance on the police and ensuring that all parts of Government have access to the capabilities necessary to tackle fraud.

Improve the Government's ability to recover losses, as a result of fraud or suspected fraud against public authorities, through new debt recovery and enforcement powers. This could be directly from an individual's earnings or bank accounts to recover fraud-related debt identified through PSFA investigation, or from an application of a penalty on behalf of a public authority.

Introduce new clear, strong non-criminal sanctions to provide an alternative to prosecution to reduce the dependence on costly, time-consuming criminal routes. This will also serve as an important deterrent against fraud in the public sector.

Extend the time limit for covid frauds so that we have 12 years to take action, preventing the time period for claims against some fraudsters ending potentially as early as March 2026.

Introduce independent oversight to ensure the powers are used proportionately and effectively.

This Bill will provide confidence to taxpayers that the Government are taking every step to protect public services and taxpayers' money by stopping those who exploit the system.

[HCWS383]

Written Correction

Wednesday 22 January 2025

Ministerial Correction

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Leadership on Climate Change

The following extract is from Foreign, Commonwealth and Development questions on 26 November 2024.

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

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

[*Official Report*, 26 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 627.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy):

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

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 22 January 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	997	SCOTLAND—continued	
Engagements	997	Green Energy Sector	992
SCOTLAND	987	“Make Work Pay” Initiative	991
Farming Industry	988	Promoting Scotland Internationally	990
Great British Energy	994	Strengthening the Union	987
		Support for Women Pensioners	995

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 22 January 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS AND TRADE	27WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND	
Competition and Markets Authority:		LOCAL GOVERNMENT	29WS
Appointment of Chair	27WS	Local Government Best Value	29WS
Fire Safety of Domestic Upholstered Furniture....	27WS		
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	28WS	TREASURY	28WS
Future of the Listed Places of Worship Grant		Charter for Budget Responsibility	28WS
Scheme	28WS		
HOME DEPARTMENT	29WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	31WS
Post-legislative Scrutiny of the Counter-Terrorism		Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery)	
and Border Security Act 2019	29WS	Bill	31WS

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Wednesday 22 January 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
MINISTERIAL CORRECTION	5WC	MINISTERIAL CORRECTION—continued	
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development		Leadership on Climate Change	5WC
Office	5WC		

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**not later than
Wednesday 29 January 2025**

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 22 January 2025

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 987] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Scotland
Prime Minister

Competition and Markets Authority Chairman [Col. 1009]

Answer to urgent question—(Justin Madders)

Russian Maritime Activity and UK Response [Col. 1016]

Statement—(John Healey)

Elections (Accessibility for Blind Voters) [Col. 1031]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Ms Julie Mims)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill (Money) [Col. 1034]

Motion—(Stephen Kinnock)—agreed to

Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill [Lords] [Col. 1049]

Motion for Second Reading—(Emma Reynolds)
Read a Second time

Public Services: Rural Areas [Col. 1066]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Listed Places of Worship Scheme [Col. 327WH]

Child Arrangements: Presumption of Parental Involvement [Col. 354WH]

Education, Health and Care Plans [Col. 362WH]

New Hospital Programme [Col. 389WH]

Certificate of Common Sponsorship [Col. 400WH]

General debates

Written Statements [Col. 27WS]

Written Correction [Col. 5WC]

Ministerial Correction
